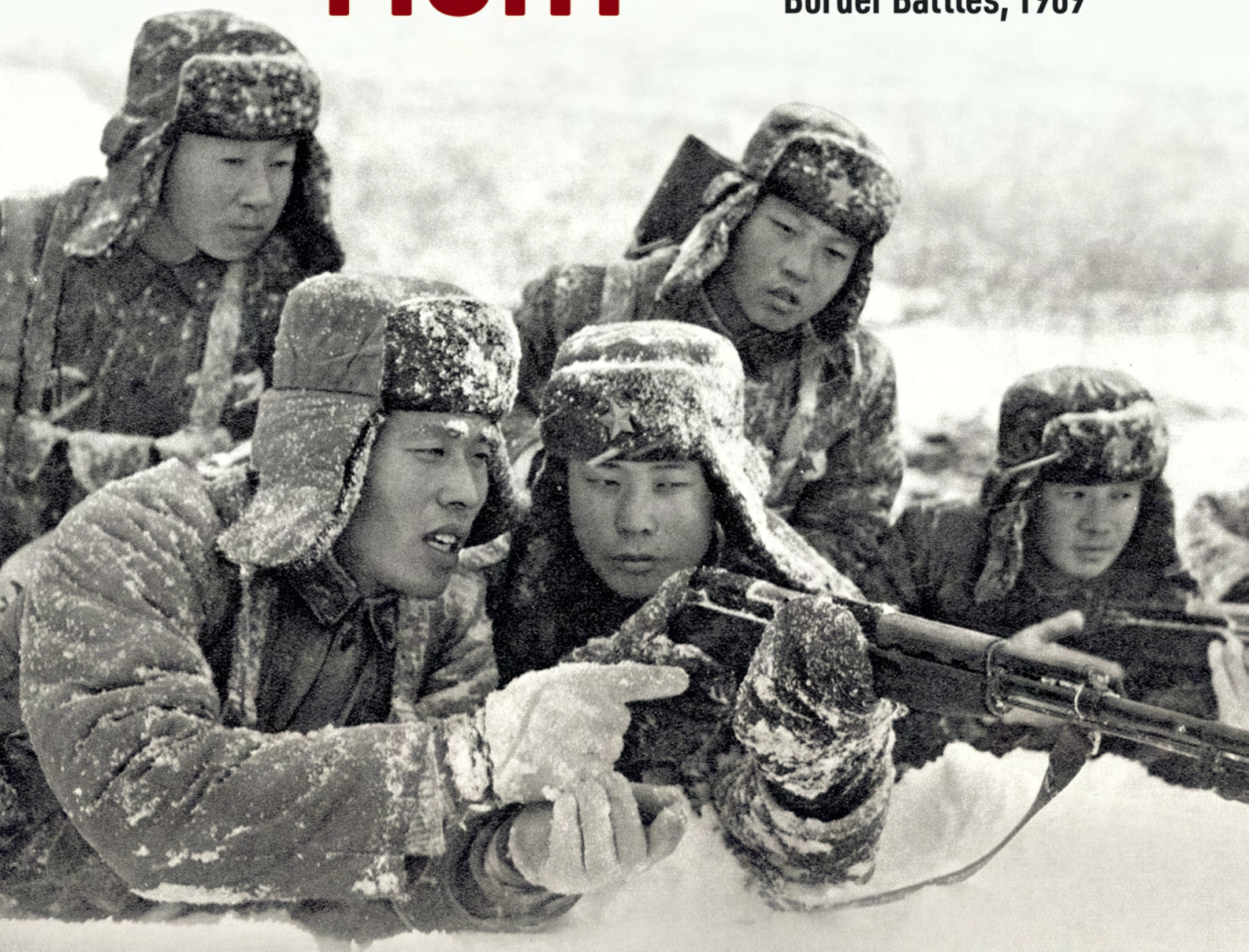
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WHEN BROTHERS FIGHT

Chinese Eyewitness Accounts of the Sino-Soviet Border Battles, 1969



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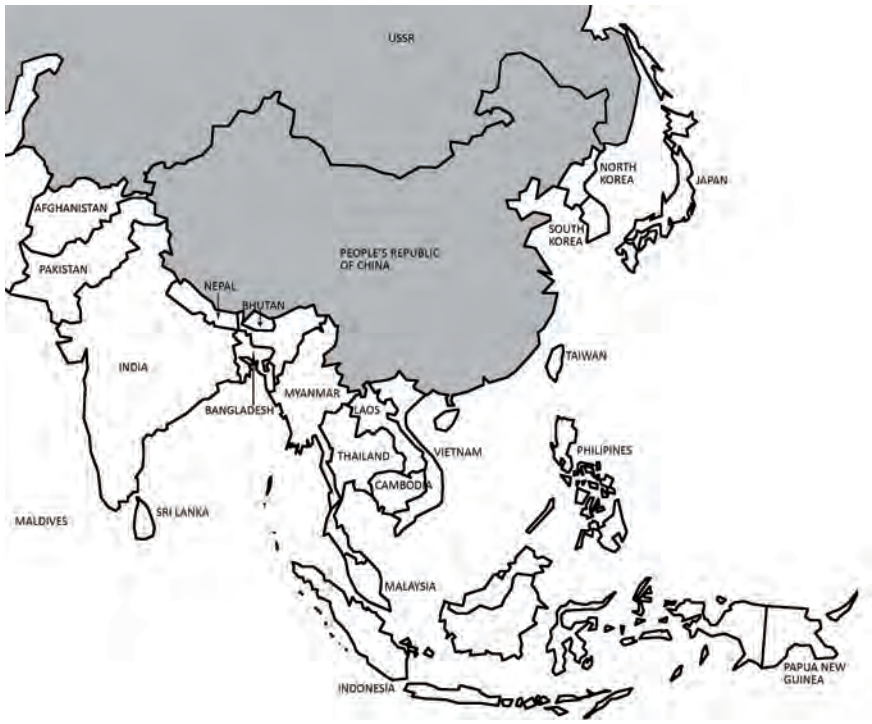
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Note: In order to simplify the use of this book, all names, locations and geographic designations are as provided in *The Times World Atlas*, or other traditionally accepted major sources of reference, as of the time of described events.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND DEDICATION

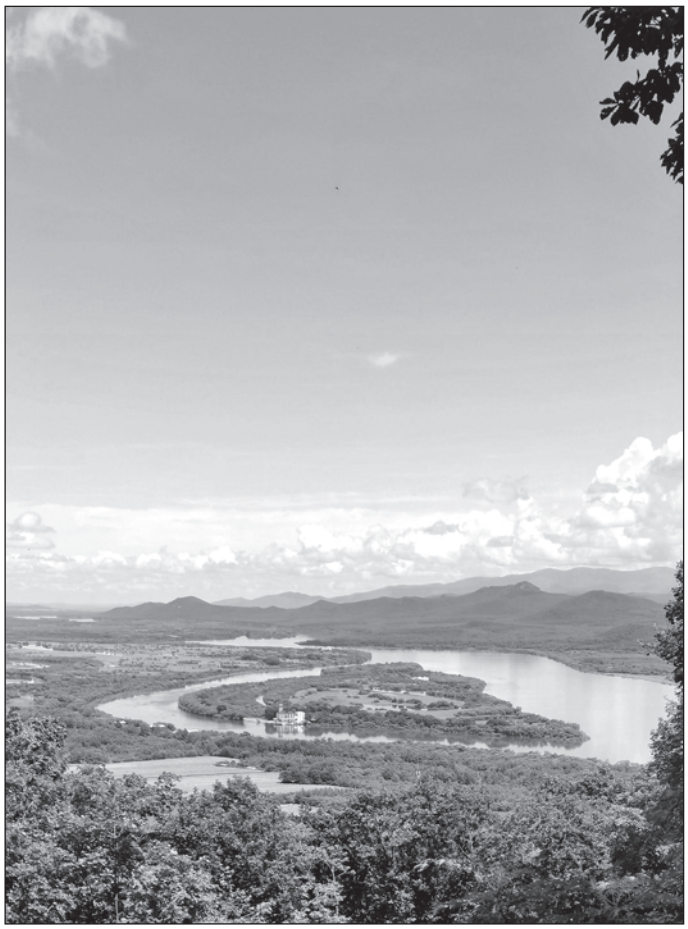
This book is dedicated to the Chinese veterans of the 1969 wars, so their voices can now, at last, be heard, not only in China but now worldwide.



ABBREVIATIONS

2iC	Second in Command
AA	Anti-Aircraft
APC	Armoured Personnel Carrier
AT	Anti-Tank
BTR-60PB	Soviet eight-wheeled APC armed with a turret-mounted 14.5mm KPVT heavy machine gun. Carries a crew of three and eight infantrymen. From *Bronetransportyor* (бронетранспортёр)
CASEVAC	Casualty Evacuation
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
C-in-C	Commander in Chief
CMC	Central Military Commission – the Chinese security forces' highest policy body, primarily controlling the Chinese PLA. The head of the CMC sits as the nation's Chairman or President, and in 1969 this was none other than Mao Zedong, or better known in the West as Chairman Mao
CO	Commanding Officer (here used to refer to commander of battalion-sized units)
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
HMG	Heavy Machine Gun
KMT	Kuomintang or The Nationalist Party. KMT is the political party in the Republic of China, initially on the Chinese mainland and in Taiwan after 1949
LMG	Light Machine Gun, the squad automatic weapon.
MBRL	Multi-Barrelled Rocket Launcher, e.g., Soviet BM-21
MBT	Main Battle Tank
OC	Officer Commanding – Commander of a Company of troops
O Group	Orders Group, a meeting held to pass across operational orders/instructions
OP	Observation Post
NCO	Non-Commission Officer
PLA	People's Liberation Army – the armed forces of the People's Republic of China
QRF	Quick Reaction Force – reinforcement on standby. Move at a moment's notice
RCL	Recoilless Rifle
RPG	Rocket-Propelled Grenade [launcher]
TAOR	Tactical Area of Responsibility

PREFACE



Zhenbao Island (Damansky Island) shown in a picture taken in the summer of 2022 from High Ground 209, the location of the Chinese HQ during the Battle of Zhenbao Island. Note the main channel of the Ussuri River on the right and the minor channel to the left. (Photo courtesy of Yang Yongfei (杨永飞)

For many, the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis was the nearest the world came to self-destruction. However, little did most of the world realise, in 1969, that the world was once again loitering at another nuclear precipice. As 1968 turned into 1969, much of the world's attention was focused on the much-anticipated Apollo 11 moonshot, oblivious to the pending calamity. Simmering tension over the decade had fuelled this total breakdown of the Sino-Soviet relationship. Border skirmishes were increasingly common as time passed, but initially, both sides wanted to prevent a complete tailspin and brush aside such border disturbances as 'unfortunate incidents.' However, from about the mid-1967, things began to deteriorate, and by 1969 there were as many as nine serious clashes along the Sino-Soviet frontiers in just eight months.[1] Except for the battle over Zhenbao Island (Damansky Island), where heavy weapons like tanks, artillery, and multi-barrel rocket launchers (MBRL) were deployed and used, other clashes were limited to gun battles with small arms and infantry crew-served weapons. After the inevitable propaganda flag waving from each side, the events were safely tucked in the file of each nation's respective archives and forgotten by the general public except for the veterans involved and a few armchair generals and historians. After the fall of the Soviet Union, some Russians began to publish accounts of the battles. Written in Russian, these books were sold exclusively in the Russian-speaking market, and for many years the discourses of the events were only available to those who read Russian. In 2021, Helion & Company published two books by Harold Orenstein and Dmitry Ryabushkin: *The Sino-Soviet Border War of 1969 Volume 1: The Border Conflict that Almost Sparked a Nuclear War* and *The Sino-Soviet Border War of 1969 Volume 2: Confrontation at Lake Zhalanashkol August 1969*. For the first time, the Sino-Soviet war was being examined in such detail in the English language. However good as it may be, Harold Orenstein and Dmitry Ryabushkin's books are written without solid facts from China and can only give partial interpretation to this brief war. To understand the battle and circumstances, one must have facts and information from both sides. This book, *When Brothers Fight: Chinese eyewitness account on Sino-Soviet Border Battles, 1969* by Benjamin Lai and Zhang Yiming, aims to fill the gap with actual accounts from Chinese veterans who took part in these border wars. To give the reader a taste of what happened, the authors have selected two of the best-known incidents of the period, the Battle of Zhenbao Island (March–May 1969) and the Tielieketi Incident (Lake Zhalanashkol, 13 August 1969), as the focus of this book.

This is an important episode of the Cold War that deserves greater exposure. This brief war marks a turning point between the two communist giants and, in one way or another, lays the foundation for international politics for the next 50 years. In 1972, China moved to the US/Western camp by signing the *Three Joint Communiqués*, normalising relations between the US and China, and establishing a



Zhenbao Island as it was in the springtime of 1969. Note the lack of vegetation and the inner channel cutting through the middle of the island. This channel was one of the Soviet main axes of attack on 2 March 1969. (PLAP 1969)

full diplomatic relationship in 1979, and the rest is history. This all started with a shooting match in 1969.

This book does not attempt to write history or point fingers at who was right and who was wrong. It merely attempts to allow the voices of the Chinese veterans to be heard; by doing so, it will enable us to see with a 20/20 vision of what happened back in 1969.

NOTES ON THE TEXT

This book draws solely on Chinese sources and interviews and, as such, will use Chinese nomenclature throughout; if different from the Chinese terms, Russian or Western names will be marked out in footnotes or explained in the text.

Unlike the West, Chinese names are all written with family names first and given names last. Therefore, author Zhang Yiming's family name is Zhang (张), and his given name is Yiming (一鸣). For all the veterans mentioned in this book, I will follow the Chinese naming practice throughout.

Reading Chinese geographical names can be confusing, and it can be hard to keep track of who and what. In an effort to make it more obvious, I have listed the Chinese geographical names as they would be spelled in the vernacular. The spelling of many Chinese place names has subtly changed over the years. For consistency, I have used modern spelling, so instead of Peking, I will use the more familiar term, Beijing.

This book focuses on memories as told by Chinese veterans; therefore, the Soviet side of the discourse does not feature prominently in the text. Many Soviet veterans who deserve to have their exploits written about in passing do not feature. To Chinese military historians and Chinese veterans, this book is something of a snapshot of the events of the time, not a comprehensive history of the military units involved nor a chronological listing of all the events. I hope veterans and historians will read in the spirit in which it has been written.

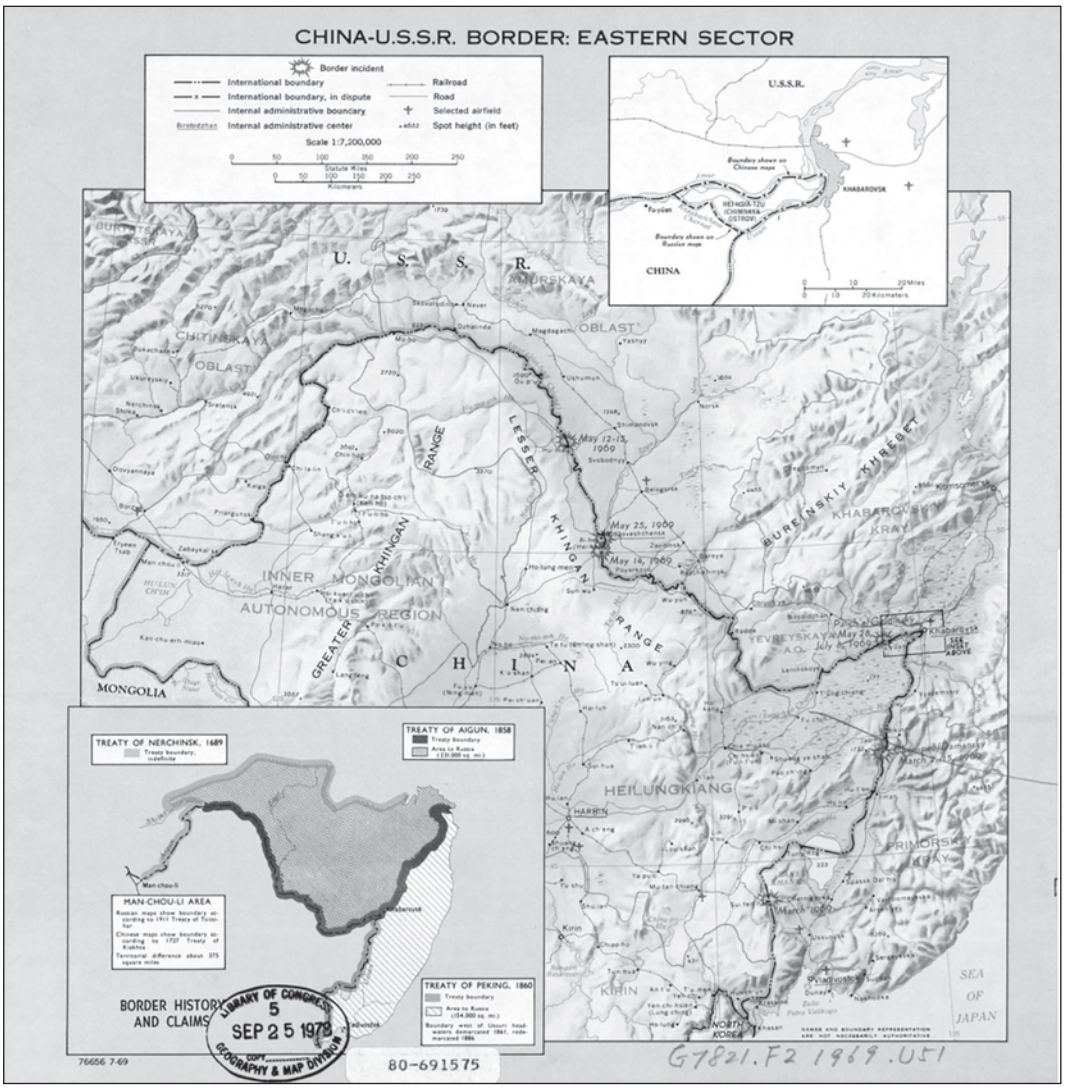
1
INTRODUCTION

Historical Grievances – Tsarist Period

The origin of the disputes between China and the Soviet Union was laid back in the nineteenth century, before the founding of the Soviet Union and well before Lenin, back to a time when Russia was under Alexander II (reign 1855–1881). China was then known as the Great Qing Empire, and its head of state was Xianfeng Emperor (咸丰, reign 1850–1861). In 1858, the Great Qing Empire signed the Treaty of Aigun (瑷珲条约, Айгунский договор) and from this established much of the modern border between Russia and China. The Treaty of Aigun reversed much of the land gained by China in the 1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk (尼布楚条约, Нерчинский договор) by transferring the land between the Wai Xingan Mountain Range; (外兴安), Становой хребет, Stanovoy Range) and the Heilong River (黑龙江, Amur River) from China to Russia. By the stroke of a pen, Russia received over 600,000 square kilometres from China, which is just slightly under the current size of France.

The Russian Empire owes much to two great emperors; one was Peter the Great (reign 1682–1725), who pushed Russia westwards, and the next period of expansion under Catherine the Great (reign 1762–1796), who extended the Russian Empire south and eastwards. Population movement eastwards, by desire or force, eventually laid the foundations of a clash of interests between the Russian and Chinese empires. As Russia expanded eastwards, it developed a desire to become a naval power in the Pacific, which led to the establishment of the Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky maritime outpost in 1740 in Russian Alaska, and near the River Amur watershed. The Manchu, who ruled China from 1644 to 1911, never governed that region effectively or conducted territorial surveys. As nomadic people, the Manchu just did not have the notion of a fixed borderline with marker stones as a means to separate empires. After all, as a nomadic race, comings and goings were just part of everyday life; therefore, these initial Russian advances went unnoticed until too late.

The cracks in the Qing Empire began in the third decade of the nineteenth century, and the British gave the first blow to the Chinese by soundly defeating the Manchu with only a handful of ships and soldiers in the First Opium War (1839–1841). This was the first of many 'unequal treaties' the Chinese were forced to sign. China was forced to open up the country to trade to the many adventurous merchants who were brave enough to venture east, and for whom drugs in the form of opium were one of the major money-spinners. Names one tends to associate with much of the 'old rich' of the Western world, who's-who in the Forbes Rich List like Forbes, Astor, Delano (Roosevelt's mother's side of the family), Jardines, etc., all took advantage of a weakening China to enrich themselves. External pressure from foreigners led to internal strife; China was constantly fighting from 1850 to 1864. A series of uprisings, with the Taiping Rebellion being one of the bloodiest, caused the most damage to the country. If one invasion was not enough, during the Taiping Rebellion, a second Opium War (also known as the Arrow War or the Second China War) occurred, and the French and British took advantage of a crumbling China and took the battle right into the nation's capital, culminating with the looting and sacking of the Summer Palace. Capitalising on China's misfortune, Russia's Governor-General of the Far East, Nikolay Muraviev, camped tens of thousands of troops on the borders of Mongolia and Manchuria, preparing to make legal the Russian de facto control over the Amur. In addition to gaining territory the size of France, Russia gained control over regional trade and near exclusivity in the use of the Amur, Ussuri, and Sungari rivers. Two years later, the terms of the Treaty of Aigun would be confirmed in the Treaty of Beijing,[1] which established the Ussuri River (in Chinese: Wusuli River (乌苏里河)) as the border between Russia and China. With this came



A US map of the Sino-Soviet clash. The location of the armed clash at Wubalao Island (Kultuk Island) is recorded as 12–15 May 1969; two other bloody interventions recorded by the US but not disclosed in China nor the Soviet Union, occurred on the Amur River on 14 May and 25 May 1969. They clashed at Heixazi Island (Bolshoi Ussuriysky Island) many times. In the US records there are two incidents – 28 May and 8 July – not in the Chinese records, and the incident on 10 October 1969 where the Chinese sank a Soviet patrol boat was not recorded in the US database. One armed clash on the Ussuri River, downstream from Xingkai Lake (兴凯湖) (Khanka Lake), recorded sometime during May 1969, seems to have been omitted from both Soviet and Chinese popular records. (Open source)

the strategic Manchurian fishing village of Haishenwai (海参崴), later transformed to become the base of the Russian Pacific Fleet, Vladivostok.

The Russianization of Far Eastern Siberia also came hand-in-hand with a deorientalization policy. In 1900, Blagovéshchensk (Благовещенск/海兰泡) witnessed a massacre of Asians (Chinese/Koreans/Japanese) and again in 1938. Under the orders of Stalin (known in Russian as the Депортация китайцев), Chinese and other 'undesirables,' mainly non-Slavs, were killed or expelled en masse.

The Bolshevik Revolution gave the young Chinese republic a short reprieve from further Russian encroachment. The young Soviet Union declared in the Karakhan Manifesto of July 1919 that it would return control of the Chinese Eastern Railway to China without compensation and renounced Russia's share of the Boxer Indemnity. On 27 September 1920, Lenin announced that the Soviet Government: 'Declares null and void all the treaties concluded with China by the former Governments of Russia, renounces *all* seizure of Chinese territory, and *all* Russian concessions in China, without any compensation and forever, all that had been predatorily seized from her by the Tsar's Government and the Russian Bourgeoisie' (emphasis added). Furthermore, by the 1924 Agreement with China:

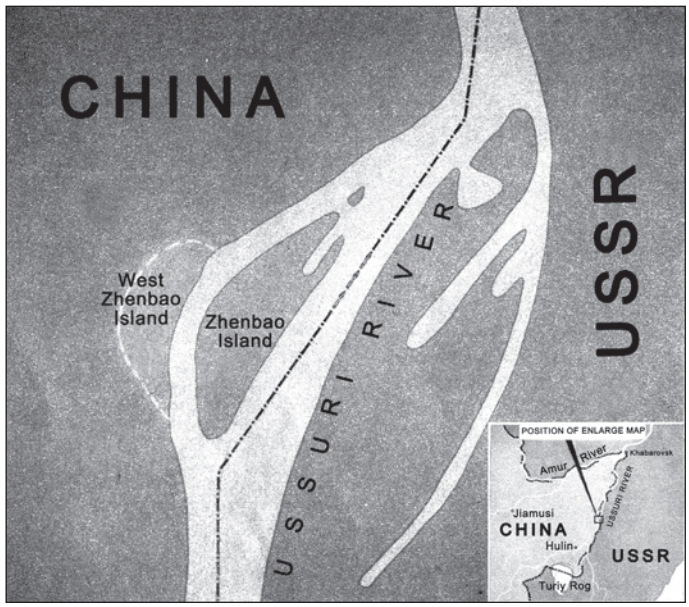
> The Soviet Government agreed to annul all conventions, treaties, agreements, protocols, and contracts concluded between the government of China and the Tsarist Government and to replace them with instruments based on equality, reciprocity, and justice. Such new agreements would be in harmony with the spirit of the Declarations of the Soviet Government of the years of 1919 and 1920 to re-demarcate their national boundaries.

But when the time came for actual negotiations in 1924, the Soviets did not relinquish any territorial rights, nor did they consider the border question from the viewpoints advanced in the declaration. In 1964, during the Sino-Soviet border talks, the Soviet Government began to backtrack on the declarations made by Lenin, arguing that renunciation involved only such treaty rights as extraterritoriality and spheres of influence. Furthermore, since the Soviet declarations of 1919 and 1920 and the Sino-Soviet agreement of 1924 did not indicate that the treaties defining the location of the present Sino-Soviet border were included among the unequal or secret treaties, there could be no discussion of their abrogation or revision. Here lies the seed of the war in 1969.

If the Treaty of Aigun and Beijing was the cause of the battle on Zhenbao Island (Damansky Island) in March 1969, the other notable battle of the Sino-Soviet border clashes occurred on 13 August 1969 on what is today the Sino-Kazakhstan border. To the Chinese, this battle is known as Tielieketi Incident, but to the Soviets, it is better known as 'the border conflict near Lake Zhalanashkol.' The loss of territory in the western region of China, this time some 440,000 square kilometres, was sealed by what was known by the Russians as the Treaty of Saint Petersburg (1881),[2] or to the Chinese the Treaty of Ili (伊犁条约, Договор об Илийском крае). The foundation of this treaty was based mainly on an earlier treaty, the 1864 Treaty of Tarbagatai (中俄勘分西北界约, Тарбатагайский договор, Treaty of Chuguchak) and the Treaty of Livadia (里瓦几亚条约, Ливадийский договор),[3] but the complication of drawing up so long a border led to a series of special protocols (five in total) to better define local geographical intricacies. The section of land



The location of Qiliqin Island is just upstream of Zhenbao Island. The Chinese plan for the Battle of Zhenbao Island in 1969 was actually a rehash of the 1968 Battle of Qiliqin Island. (PLAP 1969)



Zhenbao Island is small with a total surface area of only 0.74 km^2. North to south it is 2,000m long, and the widest point is 500m. The distance to the Chinese mainland is 200m, and the distance to Soviet mainland 300m. (PLAP 1969)

which led to the clash some 100 years later was governed by the Kabinsky protocol signed on 3 October 1883.[4]

Nationalists on each side will point their fingers at the opposite side and give reasons why they are correct, and the wrongs are all the fault of the opposing camp. However, when all the facts are laid bare and the issues are seen devoid of nationalistic sentiments, the reality is that the Treaty of Aigun and the Treaty of Beijing were made in imprecise language, lacking in technical details such that the actual borderline between Russia and China was not agreed upon in a manner to prevent future conflict. After the fall of the Qing Empire, China became a republic and, at the same time, saw the rise of Chinese nationalism and an intellectual re-examination of why a once-mighty empire was belittled so fast and so thoroughly. This re-examination concluded that the Treaty of Aigun, like many treaties signed between the Qing and later Republican China and foreign powers, was one-sided, despite the niceties and use of diplomatic and gentlemanly language.[5] The result of what the Chinese deemed to be 'unequal treaties' was the loss of national sovereignty, inability to enforce laws in their land, imposed taxes and duties, and when duties were paid, most of it went to the coffers of foreign powers. The gradual loss of sovereignty meant that even though feudal China was a thing of the past, for most of the first half of the twentieth century, republican China was surviving as a semi-colonial entity where the best lands and ports were under the control of foreign powers. During this period, foreign armies and naval ships came and went as they pleased. When crimes were committed, the perpetrator could escape justice through the extraterritoriality clause found in many of the 'unequal treaties.'

Even after both countries changed their name, Russia to the Soviet Union and the Great Qing to the Republic of China, the loss of territory continued. Another gripe the Chinese had was how in 1920, Soviet troops supported insurrection by Mongolian guerrillas led by Damdin Sükhbaatar (1893–1923) to establish a new pro-Soviet Mongolian client state. By 1924, it claimed independence as the Mongolian People's Republic.

For many years, China had to endure these humiliations, but when China recovered economically, militarily, and diplomatically, these treaties became the source of problems to be resolved, which, unfortunately, on this occasion, turned into a hot war in 1969.

Historical Grievances – Modern Era

When people are asked to describe the Sino-Russian relationship, many will point toward the friendship between Joseph Stalin (1879–1953) and Mao Zedong (1893–1976). Some will point out their shared communist ideology and the help given by the Soviet Union to China during the first two decades after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. After all, the birds of a feather flock together. In 1945, the Soviet Union was strong while China was weak, and aid flowed from Moscow to Beijing. But as one delves further back in history, aid was not only one way. During the Russian Revolution and the subsequent Russian Civil War, the Beiyang Government of Northern China sent troops supporting the Allies against the Bolsheviks, but the numbers were small and made no impact. While the Chinese state chose to support the White Russians, the Chinese people were drawn to the Bolsheviks. 'Arise, all ye of oppressed workers,' the communist ideal was music to the ears of the many Chinese who worked in Russia as contract laborers. Many served as bodyguards of Bolshevik functionaries; some, not an insignificant number, even served in the Cheka, the forerunner of the KGB. The number of Chinese in Russia was so great that the Chinese could even form complete regiments; some estimated that there were tens of thousands of Chinese troops in the Red Army.

In the early days of the Chinese republic, when China was locked in civil war, which historians called the period of the warlords, it was Russian military advisors who came to instruct at the famous Whampoa Military Academy, the Chinese equivalent of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. The Kuomintang (KMT), the Nationalist Party, which many remember as a pro-American political party on account of their close involvement with the United States during the Second World War, was created using the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) as a model. The son of Chaing Kaishek (1887–1975), Chiang Chingkuo (1910–1988),[6] who was later the President of the Republic of China in Taiwan, spent his youth (1925–1937) in Russia and even took a Russian woman as his wife.[7] Aside from political and military ties, Russia and China had strong social as well as people-to-people links. It was Soviet aviators who first came to the aid of the Chinese during the early stages of the Second World War in 1938–1941, well before the

more famous American Volunteer Group (AVG), better known as the Flying Tigers. Sadly, their contribution is now largely forgotten. To many, the fact that Stalin was a communist and a fellow follower of Marx's ideology, meant he should naturally side with his brethren, the Chinese Communists. However, in truth, Stalin played both sides (Nationalists and Communists) in the Chinese Civil War (1945–1949), and his support of Mao was often lukewarm and conditional. One of Stalin's better-known double-dealings was forcing the Chinese to accept the loss of Mongolia through *The China-Soviet Union: Treaty of Friendship and Alliance*.[8] T. V. Soong (宋子文) (1894–1971), the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, was forced to accept the terms of the treaty in exchange for not supporting the Chinese Communists in the Chinese Civil War and withdrawing troops from western Xinjiang. But then, Stalin did not keep his promise, and soon after he signed the deal with the Nationalists, he gave the Chinese Communists access to the confiscated Japanese weapons left over from 1945. In one stroke, Mao's guerrilla army, once only fit for hit-and-run raids, was instantly transformed into a proper field army with artillery and tanks.

Even after the Chinese Communists' final victory in 1949, the relationship remained difficult. Although Soviet assistance was critical to China's industrialisation, the relationship between the two supreme leaders was uncomfortable. Stalin disliked Mao's ideological and political independence, while Mao resented patronising Soviet behaviour. The People's Republic might have called itself the younger brother in the official communique, but this in no way implied satisfaction with its subordinate status. Aside from the unwillingness to be number two, another point of view on the whole Sino-Soviet split was, according to Professor Wen Tiejun (温铁军), head of the School of Sustainable Development at People's University in Beijing, saw the split as Mao's desire for true independence. Late in 1955, Mao raised the question of whether China could be called genuinely liberated and a sovereign independent country if China was so dependent on the Soviet Union, Mao iterated further, 'What's the point of unshackling ourselves from one set of overlords to be replaced by a new master?'[9]

The tensions between Moscow and Beijing, incipient under Stalin, flared up under his successor, Nikita Khrushchev (1894–1971). Ideological disputes, personality clashes between two leaders of vast egos, disagreements over the common border, and China's international role contributed to a spectacular deterioration in bilateral relations. By 1960, the unbreakable friendship had collapsed completely, graphically illustrated by the overnight withdrawal of 1,390 Soviet experts from China in June of that year.

This tussle best illustrates the breakdown of the Sino-Soviet relationship between the two communist powers in Vietnam. In the 1950s, at the request of Ho Chi Minh (1890–1969), China secretly sent military aid to the North Vietnamese. When the Americans entered the war in Vietnam, China increased its military assistance. Aside from just sending military advisors and war materials, Beijing began sending actual troops, mainly combat support troops such as anti-aircraft artillery troops, engineers, logistics and transportation, and naval mine clearance troops to Vietnam. The Soviets joined in the support by sending material aid and military personnel to North Vietnam. The assistance to Vietnam by the two communist giants was, in one sense, trying to 'buy' the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese to support the duel between the two ideology camps. In the mid-1960s, American historian Douglas Pike interviewed over 100 North Vietnamese prisoners of war or deserters.[10] In one of the interviews, he asked: 'You don't feel the Chinese and the Russians are supporting you and your war sufficiently?' and replied: 'No, they are not. They don't care about us. They are only interested in their arguments.' This pointed to one of the major problems vexing the Vietnamese conduct of war: the Sino-Soviet ideological dispute. Even low-level guerrilla fighters were aware of the problem.

In the summer of 1960, Soviet frontier guards drove away Chinese herders who were shepherding at Bozaiger mountain pass (博孜艾格尔山口) in Xinjiang. This was the first border conflict between China and the Soviet Union after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. In the spring of 1962, some six million Chinese citizens living on the border of Yili and Tacheng in Xinjiang fled to the Soviet Union. This migration was illegal as none of the Chinese who crossed the border had proper papers, but the Soviets refused to deport these unlawful migrants. To the Chinese, this massive migration could only happen because it was stirred up by Soviet propaganda. In December 1963, Nikita Khrushchev suddenly appealed to resolve Sino-Soviet border problems, but Mao Zedong saw this as part of a concerted move by Khrushchev on China on border issues.



From the 1950s to the mid-1960s, the Soviet Union and China were best of friends. From this artwork, we can see that this friendship was unequal and the Russian is shown as the 'senior' of the two friends by having his hand on the Chinese man's shoulder. (Zhang Yiming collection)

Although Khrushchev's removal in a Communist Party coup d'état in 1964 led to a



A typical propaganda painting of the period. This classic painting, made for propaganda purposes, is painted in the Socialist Realist tradition. A typical feature of the art of the period is the use of bold contrasting colours, such as blood red, and a lack of deep shadows combine to give a shining aesthetic art style popular in the Cultural Revolution period. This style of artwork has seen a revival in recent years and is popular with collectors. (PLAP 1969)

temporary relaxation of tensions, the underlying problems in the relationship remained unresolved. Indeed, under Khrushchev's successor, Leonid Brezhnev (1906–1982), the political conflict escalated into a military confrontation. To Mao Zedong, the Soviets were playing with fire by signing a new mutual defence treaty with Mongolia in 1966, paving the way for moving more Soviet troops being sent to that country, especially on sections of the Sino-Soviet border which had not been clearly defined.

This move by the Soviets alarmed Mao. But even before Soviet troops entered Mongolia, Mao was already worried about the possibility of a Soviet invasion of China. Just before Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's downfall, Mao twice asked the leaders of two fraternal Communist parties while meeting them: 'In your opinion, will Khrushchev attack us? Is it possible that the Soviet Union might dispatch troops to Xinjiang, Heilongjiang, or even Inner Mongolia?' At the same time, Mao was also worried about America's decision to escalate the Vietnam War. These factors created the background for Mao's decision to construct a 'Third Front' line by moving vital industrial equipment and production facilities to the Chinese interior, where they would have less exposure to American or Soviet invasion.

China's increasingly hostile external environment was further complicated by internal political strife. In the summer of 1966, Mao launched what is now regarded as the most disastrous political campaign, known as the Cultural Revolution. Its stated goal was to preserve Chinese communism by purging the remnants of capitalist and traditional elements from Chinese society and reimposing 'Mao Zedong Thought' as the dominant ideology in China. The Cultural Revolution was a disaster for China. It caused tremendous damage to China's economy and traditional culture.

One of the side effects of the Cultural Revolution was that previous border negotiations started in 1964 did not continue. Despite conducting several rounds of talks, progress was still slow. The fault for the lack of progress in the early rounds was primarily due to the Soviets dragging their feet; much was due to politics caused by the fall of Khrushchev. Nevertheless, although slow, talk was still better than no talk. From 1966 onwards, no border negotiation meetings were held, and no one called for the resumption of negotiations until 1969, which was far too late to do anything to avert war.



The typical appearance of Chinese PLA soldiers during the Cultural Revolution. The binocular case helps to identify the officer in the foreground; officers did not carry rifles. (PLAP 1969)

The Chinese PLA during the Cultural Revolution

The Cultural Revolution is one of the most chaotic periods in modern Chinese history. It was a decade-long period of political and social chaos caused by Mao Zedong's bid to use the Chinese masses to reassert his control over the Communist Party. Whereas all the 'unequal treaties' were imposed by foreigners, the Cultural Revolution was entirely self-inflicted.

The 1960s saw a marked change in China's strategic thinking and military doctrine. This revision of military doctrine was propelled by two factors: China's acquisition of nuclear weapons and the loss of the Soviet Union as an ally and strategic partner. The Soviet Union replaced America



Political meetings were a primary activity of the PLA, conducted at the expense of military exercise and real soldering. Coupled with the lack of mechanisation, the Chinese PLA during this period was relatively weak and could only rely on human wave tactics and ambushes to attack. (PLAP) 1969)



To many soldiers of the era, the primary news source came from newspapers, with information delivered to them via the political officer. Here a political officer is reading the latest news from the *People's Daily* concerning the announcement by the government of China on the recent Zhenbao Island armed clash. (PLAP 1969)

as China's principal foe. To defend against a possible Soviet attack, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) compensated for its outdated capabilities by using concepts of operations based on protraction, attrition, and the threat of nuclear retaliation or 'people's war under modern conditions.' Continental defence was still the core strategy, but it included the ability to conduct offensive operations short distances outside China's borders; fighting 'outside the gates,' as Mao would say. 'People's war under modern conditions' differed from the old people's war in two ways. First, the new strategy intended to defeat the adversary closer to China's borders, avoiding an endless retreat into the interior. Second, cities would have to be defended because cities, not the countryside, supported the logistical requirements of the Chinese armed forces. Nonetheless, the new strategy relied on the PLA's massive size to lure the enemy into China's interior and exhaust its adversary through protracted war.

To understand China, one must understand the relationship between the PLA and the state. First, one must remember that the Chinese army, the PLA, was not only instrumental in bringing the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to power but is an extension of the party: it is the armed force of the CCP and not of the state. Being the muscle of a political organisation, the PLA has always been a highly politicised organisation. The prefix 'People's Liberation' reflects the nature of China's army; it is unlike what one understands of an army in the conventional sense. It is described as not merely a fighting force but a working force and an important component of society. During this time, the entire society was politicised, including the PLA.

The effect of the Cultural Revolution on the PLA can be divided into two areas. First, it wrecked the command of the PLA with purges of senior members of the military, such as General Luo Ruiqing (罗瑞卿) (1906–1978), Chief-of-Staff of the PLA; Marshal Peng Dehuai (彭德怀) (1898–1974), the former Commander in



This typical scene shows a Chinese Air Defence night inceptor squadron, with J-5As (essentially Chinese-made copies of the MiG-17PF) in the background, and the ubiquitous political meeting being held on the taxiway. (PLAP 1969)

Chief (C-in-C) of the Chinese forces in the Korean War; Marshal He Long (贺龙) (1896–1969), a Long March veteran; Marshal Zhu De (朱德) (1886–1976), a former head of state and father of the PLA. Second, the politicisation of the PLA almost destroyed it as an effective fighting force.

However, the politicisation of the PLA began much earlier than 1966, the official date that historians deemed the start of the Cultural Revolution. This started in 1959 when Marshal Lin Biao (1907–1971) became the Minister of National Defence. Concurrently, Lin also held the post of Minister of Defence as well as co-serving as the Vice Chairman of the Communist Party of China and Vice Premier. Lin was at his apogee, second to only Mao himself.

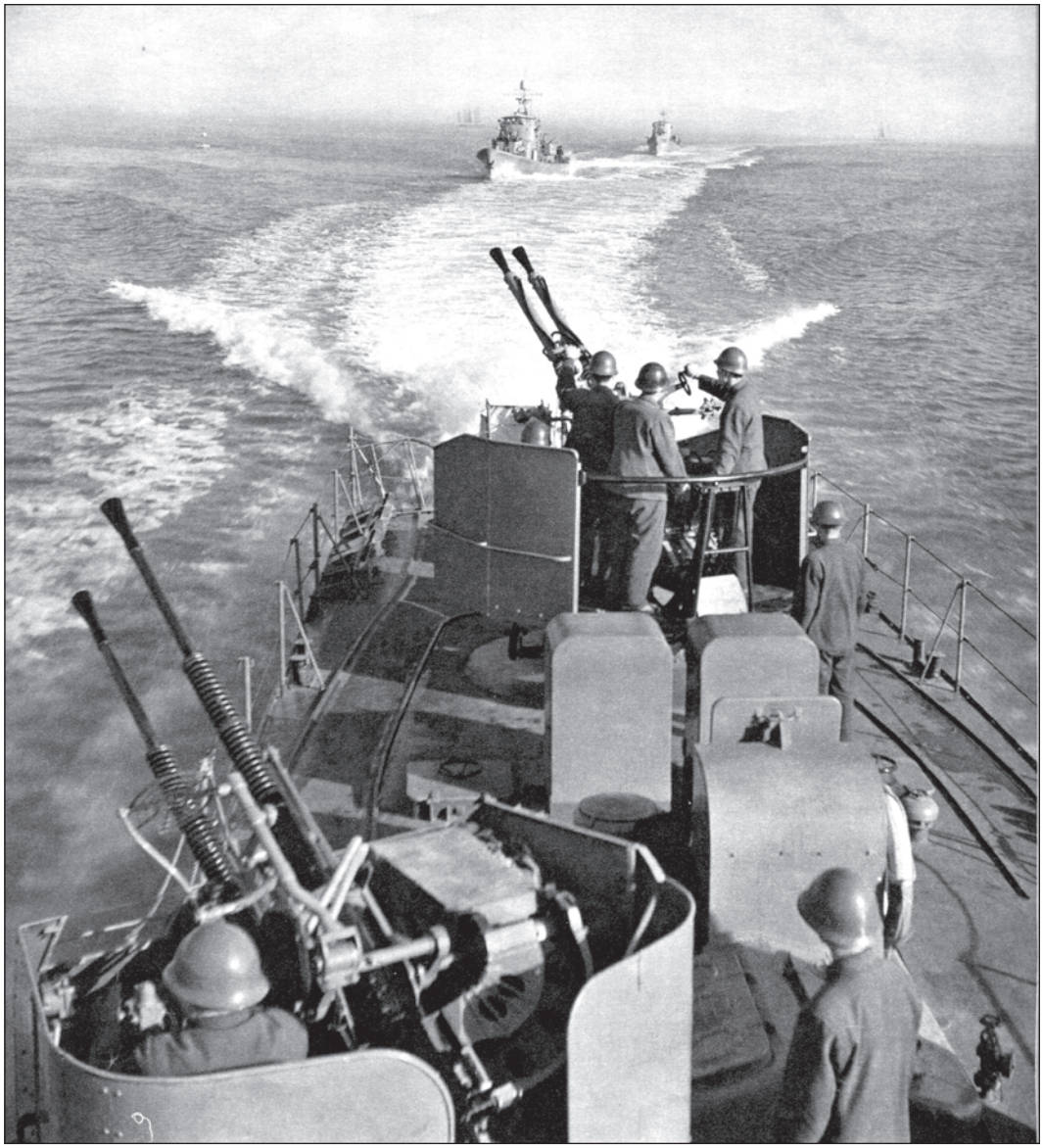
As Defence Minister, Lin's policies differed from those of his predecessor. With Lin at the helm of the PLA, his first immediate action was to reform the PLA based on political criteria. First, he abolished all signs and privileges of rank. Second, he purged members considered sympathetic to the USSR. His dislike of all things Soviet was probably a factor in why the PLA used military solutions to 'resolve' the Sino-Soviet border disputes. The third major reform he made in the PLA was that he emphasised non-military work such as production and construction. The final, but probably his most infamous move as Defence Minister, was to kickstart the 'Mao worshipping Cult' by putting Mao's Thoughts as *THE* key study material in the military. By raising the role of politics in the PLA, the PLA's political commissars' power and their status in the military also expanded probably beyond its usefulness and capability, with long-term negative implications for the PLA's effectiveness as a military force.

In 1959, Lin was at the pinnacle of his power. His ability to fast track to prominence was because he had outstanding credentials. Lin was a child prodigy; at 23, he was already a corps commander. Lin was credited as *THE* general who gave Mao China. Lin's claim to



A famous propaganda photo of the period shows PLA soldiers on patrol around the Ussuri River. The primary battle skills of the PLA of the period were grenade throwing, use of satchel charges, use of shovel, digging in, skill at arms, bayonet fighting, watercraft, and river crossing. (PLAP 1969)

fame was that he commanded the decisive campaigns in north-east China, which wrenched the soul out of the Nationalist army and led the PLA into Beijing, all done without firing a shot. Lin's army crossed the Yangtze River in 1949 and decisively defeated the KMT's Nationalist army and took control of south-east China. Initially, the pollicisation of the PLA was small. In the early 1960s, the emphasis on the PLA was still on military training, and competition between the various PLA units was encouraged. The sharp turn started on 29 December 1964 when Lin issued a directive saying that focusing on military competition was done at the expense of political education. Lin said: 'The ratio of time between politics and military education is generally three to seven, but it should be reversed to seven to three in exceptional cases. The question of what gives way to what should be determined by one principle: if in doubt, all other activities must give way to politics. Military training, production, etc., take up a certain amount of time but should not impact politics; on the contrary, politics could impact others.'



The Chinese Navy (PLAN) during the Cultural Revolution consisted mainly of small patrol craft such as the Type 62 coastal anti-submarine patrol craft. The mount nearest to the camera is a twin 25mm cannon, while the furthest mount holds a twin 37mm cannon. (PLAP 1969)

On 22 March 1966, Lin Biao made another directive: 'The ratio of time between political education and military education is at the moment on a 30/70 split, but should consider changing it to 40/60 or even 50/50.' In August, he made another revision. According to the instruction promulgated by the Central Military Commission (CMC) in the directive 'Reform of the Military Education of the Troops' on 16 August, 'Time spent on political education should account for at least 50 percent of the troops' working time.' In fact, military training for trained soldiers fell to 40 percent, and for militia and reserve forces, military training only accounted for 20 percent of their time. Military training was only a measly 10 percent for troops engaged in production. Obviously, this had a severe impact on the combat effectiveness of the PLA.

According to Li Da (李达) (1905-1993), who was then the deputy chief of the General Staff and in charge of military training for the entire PLA*:* 'Although on paper, military training accounts for 40 percent of the time under the '5-4-1' rule*,* in reality, this provision was a sham during the Cultural Revolution.'[11] As a result, the number of troops engaged in military training was reduced drastically. One of the key impacts of this policy was the drop in the quality of officers. Many of the recruits who entered the army during this period barely finished their basic training and may have had only one period of live-fire training. In that crazy era when the world turned upside down, these so-called soldiers, who hardly knew how to hold a rifle, were dispatched off to their regiments.

Suddenly in 1969, in accordance with Mao's instruction of 'preparation for war,' the CMC and the General Staff Department began the arduous task of shaking down the PLA, who, for almost three years, spent practically no time on military training. But this reawakening came too late to meet the needs of the Zhenbao Island incident. Mao's proclamation to the PLA was serious. Not only was the entire PLA trained hard for war, the PLA was also instructed to prepare for famine and the nation for war. For frontline troops, with emphasis on those units engaged in border defence, troops in sensitive areas such as northern and north-east China as well as western China (areas that bordered the Soviet Union), their military training time would be higher than other parts of the PLA.

Despite the order from Mao himself, the PLA was still unsure and hesitated to implement his edict fully. The chaos created by the Cultural Revolution, with a constant change of policy, where one can be the hero one day and the next day a nobody jailbird, made many wary of doing anything unless they were 200 percent sure. Second, much of the PLA could not find time to do military training. In

one order, the CMC wanted more military training but also wanted higher production targets in another order. There was simply not enough time in the day to do both! According to available data, the average military training time for all troops in 1970 was only 40 days per year, and for construction and production troops, only 20 days. The PLA Navy, was no better; in 1970, it was reported that only 17 percent of the time was spent on military training in some naval units. The People's Liberation Army Air Force also suffered from a lack of flight hours. For example, in 1956, each jet fighter pilot flew an average of 78 hours, while between 1966 and August 1971, the number of hours spent in flight time in the air force dropped significantly to only 38 hours per year.

After the failed coup d'état by Lin Biao in September of 1971, where Lin and his entourage were killed in a mysterious plane crash in Mongolia, the PLA began to take steps to resurrect itself from the political chaos. Now, regular military training began to filter back into barrack life without Lin in charge. On 4 October 1971, Mao Zedong, when receiving the members of the CMC, instructed the army must prepare for war as its single most important objective. Soon thereafter, training guidelines were issued. All training infantry units should have a minimum of 90 days of military training per year and 120 days for technical troops. For production and construction units, all must be first qualified as a rifleman and engaged in military training for not less than 40 days per year, and those in technical arms have at least 60 days a year of training. In 1972, the General Staff Department submitted a military reform plan to Marshal Ye Jianying (叶剑英) (1897–1986). The report stated that by 1974, the ratio of military and political training time was to be 6:4 for infantry and 7:3 for technical soldiers.

However, before these reforms could be implemented, they were again interrupted by a radical coterie dubbed the 'Gang of Four.' The gang's leading figure was none other than Mao's fourth wife, Jiang Qing (江青) (1914–1991). The gang was responsible for some of the worst excesses of the societal chaos that ensued during the 10 years of turmoil. The turmoil also had a severe effect on weapon development. Members of the scientific community suffered purges and arrests as 'spies,' 'capitalist roaders,' or 'revisionists.' These repressions affected the development of Chinese weaponry, such as jet planes, submarines, ships, and missiles. As a result, when the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, the weapons in service with the PLA were at least one, if not two generations behind the West. Although there were setbacks, the Chinese did manage to detonate their first atomic bomb in 1964 and a hydrogen bomb in 1967. Despite only having part of the blueprint after the withdrawal of the Soviet scientists, the Chinese still managed to reverse engineer the MiG-21 (NATO: Fishbed) fighter calling it the J-7, albeit with much delay.

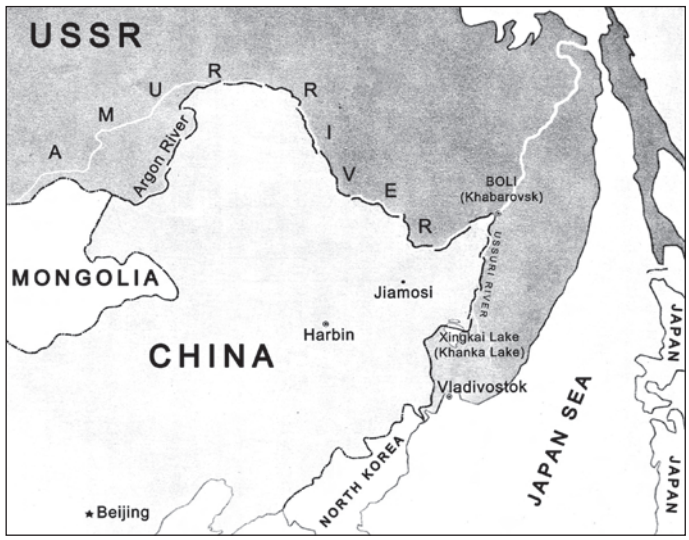
2
THE GATHERING STORM

Political and Diplomatic Manoeuvrings

The Western world began to learn of the Chinese-Soviet territorial question in 1962–1963. Mao finally brought the problem into the open when he talked to a Japanese Socialist Party delegation on 10 July 1964. In the interview, he supported Japanese claims to the Kurile Islands and criticised the Soviet Union for its territorial ambitions. In his criticism, Mao emphasised three points: (1) the 1954 Soviet domination of Mongolia, (2) the Soviet Union's designs in Xinjiang (western China) and territories north of the Amur River (northern and north-eastern China), and (3) the concentration of Soviet troops along the Chinese border which posed a threat to Beijing.

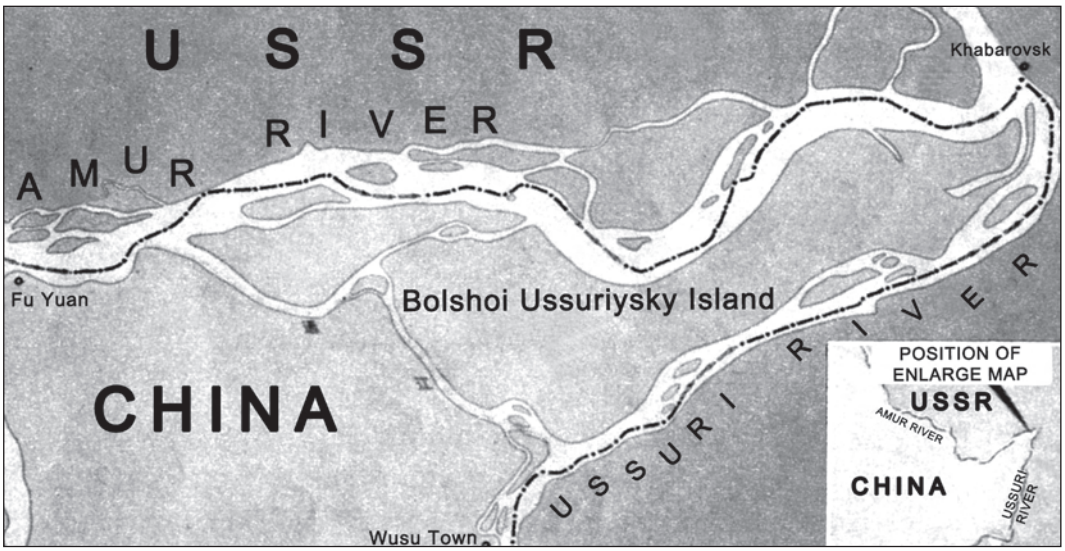
A week later, Premier and Minister of Foreign Affairs Zhou Enlai (周恩来) (1898–1976) revealed to the press that in January 1957, he had raised the territorial issues covering Japan, China, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe, but he could not get a satisfactory answer from Khrushchev. We can say that the Sino-Soviet territorial disputes developed in 1954, two years before the ideological split in 1956. If the ideological split was initially just a difference in opinion, this crack soon became a chasm. In June 1959, Khrushchev rescinded the 1957 promise made in the *New Defence Technical Accord* to provide China with a prototype atomic bomb, immediately putting the Sino-Soviet relationship into reverse.

The first open territorial dispute came during the Cuban missile crisis. At that time, China and India were amidst a frontier war. The Soviet Union supported India, and in response, China chastised the Soviets for 'adventurism.' Khrushchev hit back, pointing out the 'double standard' regarding Hong Kong and Macao. Like two quarrelling teenagers, the two communist giants turned on each other, albeit at this stage just shouting at each other for now.



The land border between the Soviet Union and China (east of Mongolia) is mainly marked by the Amur River (east-to-west) and Ussuri River (north-to-south). The southern termination of the Ussuri River border is Vladivostok. Vladivostok, meaning 'lord of the east', was, prior to being taken over by Tsarist Russia, known as Haishenwai (海参崴), a name that the Chinese still use when referring to the city. During the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), the city, then only a large village, was Haishenwai, translated from the Manchu Haišenwai or 'small seaside village'. (PLAP 1969, with modifications)

Despite the diplomatic shouting match, the Soviets and the Chinese had their first sit-down border talk in Beijing on 25 February 1964. The first round of talks focused on the definition of 'unequal treaties.' The Soviet Union flatly rejected the Chinese position concerning the borders by denying that the nineteenth century border treaties were 'unequal' and had no territorial conflicts with



Map showing the location of Heixiazi Island (Bolshoi [Big] Ussuriysky Island). (PLAP 1969 with added annotations)

any neighbouring states. Second, the Chinese steadfastly upheld the principle of the thalweg in the river boundaries, i.e., the dividing line of an international river follows the centre of the main channel. According to this principle of international law, most of the riverine islands on the Amur and Ussuri rivers would belong to China, but the Soviets refused to accept this principle and offered maps to challenge the Chinese claim.

Third, there was a controversy relating to maps. The Chinese rejected the Soviet map used in the Treaty of Beijing as inaccurate as the scale of 1:1,000,000 was far too small to determine ownership accurately. The Chinese submitted a larger-scale map of the border to support their position. The Soviets rejected this position too, so there was nothing to talk about as far as the Soviets were concerned. The only bright side to this fruitless meeting was that both parties concurred that ancient rights, old treaties, and associated historical practices should stay in effect until a new treaty could be negotiated. Therefore, the status quo would have to be maintained until a legal change could be agreed upon. This ended the first round of the Sino-Soviet border negotiations.

The Soviet rejection of the principle of 'unequal treaties' was that if they accepted this point, this might open the floodgate for China to claim back 5.5 million square kilometres of land if all the land lost from unequal treaties were added up. In an interview with C.L. Sulzberger of the *New York Times* in October 1973, Prime Minister Zhou Enlai reiterated that Beijing never expected Moscow to return these vast areas back. The Chinese expected a readjustment of the borders, a few kilometres here and there, accurately delineated in a new treaty.

In August 1968, the Soviet Army and elements of the Warsaw Pact used the pretext of a military exercise, codename 'Szumawa,' to conduct an invasion of Czechoslovakia. The Soviet occupation of a socialist country within six hours seriously affected China. China reacted to the Soviet invasion with alarm, mainly because it believed 'that the Brezhnev doctrine could apply to China as well as to Eastern Europe.'[1]

Soon after the invasion of Czechoslovakia, the next big agenda in the communist community was the preparatory meeting of the World Communist and Workers' Parties, scheduled for 17–22 March 1969 in Moscow. It was also open knowledge that the Soviet Union wanted to use this platform of a new international conference to criticise the CCP and isolate the CCP and other leftist organisations. Mao was very much aware of the CPSU's objective in organising the Conference of World Communist and Workers' Parties, but he wanted to counter Moscow's moves by using a serious border incident, which later proved to be the battle on Zhenbao Island, to show that the Soviet Union had not only invaded Czechoslovakia, but it had also created military conflicts along the Sino-Soviet border. Mao believed that this would reveal the true colour of Soviet 'social imperialism.' It would also prove that strengthening unity and joint action against imperialism proposed by the Soviet Union was deceptive. According to Western observers, Mao wanted to undermine the conference, and the Zhenbao Island battle was his tool.

Military and on the Ground Events

In 1965, the Soviet Union initiated a massive military buildup along the Sino-Soviet border. In 1965 the Soviets had 14 combat divisions along the border, only two of which were combat-ready; by 1969, Soviet forces had increased to 30-plus divisions in the border areas (about half of which were combat-ready), totalling 270,000–290,000 men. In January 1966, the mutual defence treaty with Mongolia, which allowed Soviet troops and equipment to be stationed there, certainly inflamed the Chinese as to the intention of the Soviets.

The Sino-Mongolian border, a stretch of 4,500km, constituted a military threat to China's north, north-east, and north-west. The distance from the Sino-Mongolian border to Beijing is only about 560km; much of the terrain is perfect for tanks. Beginning in 1967, the Soviets deployed the Scaleboard (SS-12) tactical nuclear system to the border; a single-stage, liquid-fuelled, road-mobile missile with a 500-mile range and a 500-kiloton warhead. China was undoubtedly aware of these activities and used the Soviet buildup in propaganda as further evidence of Moscow's aggressive and 'revisionist' intentions. In January 1967, Mao mentioned that Soviet forces were 'on the move,' and China would later claim that the Soviets had 'again and again' increased their troops along the Sino-Soviet border. A September 1967 article in *People's Daily* noted that the Soviets were 'intensifying arms expansions and war preparations in Mongolia in an attempt to make the country a link in an 'anti-China ring of encirclement.'

Although China enjoyed superiority in terms of sheer numbers along the Mongolian/Amur River border area, these forces were largely unmotorised infantry without the level of supporting arms the Soviets had. Until the flare-up in tension, the Chinese had stationed around 14 infantry divisions in north-east China, five divisions in Inner Mongolia, and five more in Xinjiang for some years. In the latter two areas, there were additional border troops, approximately 2—3 division equivalents of border guards, a regiment of artillery attached to each division, and other support elements. The Chinese supplemented these groups with the well-known Production and Construction Corps, paramilitary units concentrated chiefly in Xinjiang. This would give the Chinese a total of 35–40 division-equivalents in the military districts along the border, or 380,000–480,000 men (based upon 11,000–12,000 men per average division).

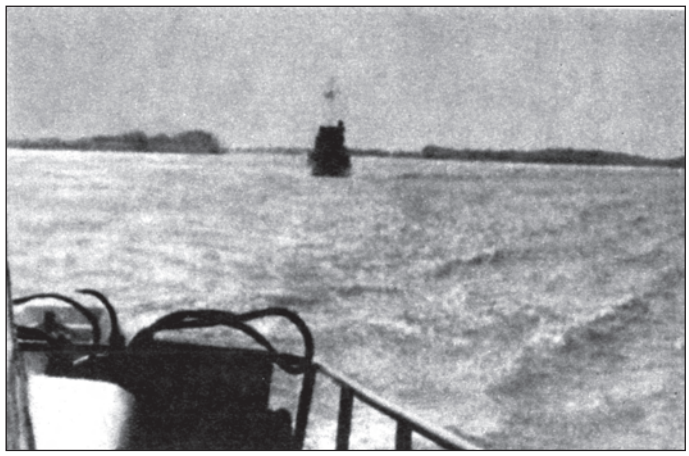


A Soviet marine border guard gestures at the Chinese who took this photo. During the author's time in the military, warnings were issued when visiting border lines or sensitive locations not to make any gestures, even a friendly wave, to prevent use by the opposite side in propaganda photos such as this. This photo appears in the Chinese propaganda magazine with the following headline: '….after doing evil deeds, these modern-day pirates then stood on the gunboat bearing malevolent and animus intent in the open. Such apathy towards the Chinese people only makes the world see the true nature of Soviet imperialism.' (PLAP 1969)

Finally, as strategic reserves, there were 14 or more divisions in the Shenyang Military Region, backed up when necessary by part of the forces stationed in the Beijing Military Region, giving the Chinese strategic flexibility: they could quickly move these forces east to the Ussuri River, north to the Amur River, and west to Mongolia. The transportation net in this region was the most highly developed of any in China.

Soviet forces, by contrast, were nearly all motorised, some even armoured, and possessed superior artillery, airplanes, and helicopters in quality and quantity. Critically the Soviets had not only more tanks but better tanks. Thus, China's superiority in troop numbers was balanced by Soviet superiority in equipment and weapons. While the Chinese had an edge in north and north-eastern China in terms of manpower, the Soviets had a manpower advantage in the Xinjiang area. On top of that, the Soviets also surpassed the Chinese in weaponry and logistics support. With a population of only one million, Mongolia was no military threat to China except for the Soviet troops stationed there. Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang were both sparsely populated, and with troops needed in other areas, the paramilitary Production and Construction Corps would therefore have to provide the first line of defence against possible Soviet incursions.

As the Sino-Soviet relations became increasingly tense, border incidents also increased. According to Chinese sources, from October 1964 to March 1969, there were 4,189 border incidents; one and a half times more than those that took place between 1960



A Soviet gunboat is giving chase here to Chinese fishing and commercial traffic on the Amur River. Note the breadth of the river; depending on the season, the Amur, the tenth longest river in the world, can be anything from 1.5km to 2.5km wide. (PLAP 1969)

and 1964. Both sides acknowledged sporadic border incidents. The Soviets charged that the Chinese initiated skirmishes in the Tien Shan mountains in Xinjiang back in 1959.[2] According to the Soviets, the Chinese increased their frequency in 1962 during the Cultural Revolution. Evidence suggests that the Chinese were not always to blame for the border flare-ups before 1969, nor were they following some preconceived plan in those they did perpetrate. Despite Soviet protestations of innocence, the Russians were probably responsible for some incidents. From 1966 to early 1968, conflicts escalated from pushing and shoving to attacking with clubs. Beijing had several options to resolve the Sino-Soviet border clashes. The first option was to adopt a position of restraint and maintain the status quo. Chinese soldiers would make every effort to avoid violent confrontations with the Soviet troops. The second option was to limit the level of fighting and prevent any expansion of the battle. The third option was to strike hard against any Soviet troops landing on Chinese territory, including using a deadly response. In the ultra-leftist atmosphere of the Cultural Revolution and the nationwide 'anti-revisionist' and anti-Soviet campaigns, Mao opted for the third plan, that is, to fight against the Soviet Union with armed force. The remaining issue to be decided was to choose an opportunity and a locality. Under such circumstances, plans for a 'counteroffensive' on Zhenbao Island were proposed.

The Chinese roster of Soviet border violations begins with a complaint about an 'intrusion' on 23 January 1967 at Damansky Island. However, Qiliqin Island (Kirkinsky Island),[3] located just 7km upstream of Zhenbao (Damansky) Island, gave the Chinese the excuse for a tougher response to Soviet provocation. On 5 January 1968, Soviet border guards, accompanied by two armoured vehicles, drove onto Qiliqin Island, and the result of the fight was that for the first time there were deaths. Four Chinese agricultural workers died on the island, and another died of their wounds.[4] The Chinese claimed that up to 2 March 1969, Soviet troops intruded 16 times onto Zhenbao (eight times during January and February 1969); 18 times onto Qiliqin Island; and on 'many occasions using helicopters, armoured cars, and vehicles' onto Qiabozi Island (or Kapotzu/Buyan Island), some 8km south along the Ussuri River.

After the loss of lives on Qiliqin Island, the CMC, chaired by Lin Biao, telegrammed both Shenyang and Beijing regions to increase their alert status and make necessary military preparations to support any diplomatic response. In the telegram, Lin said:

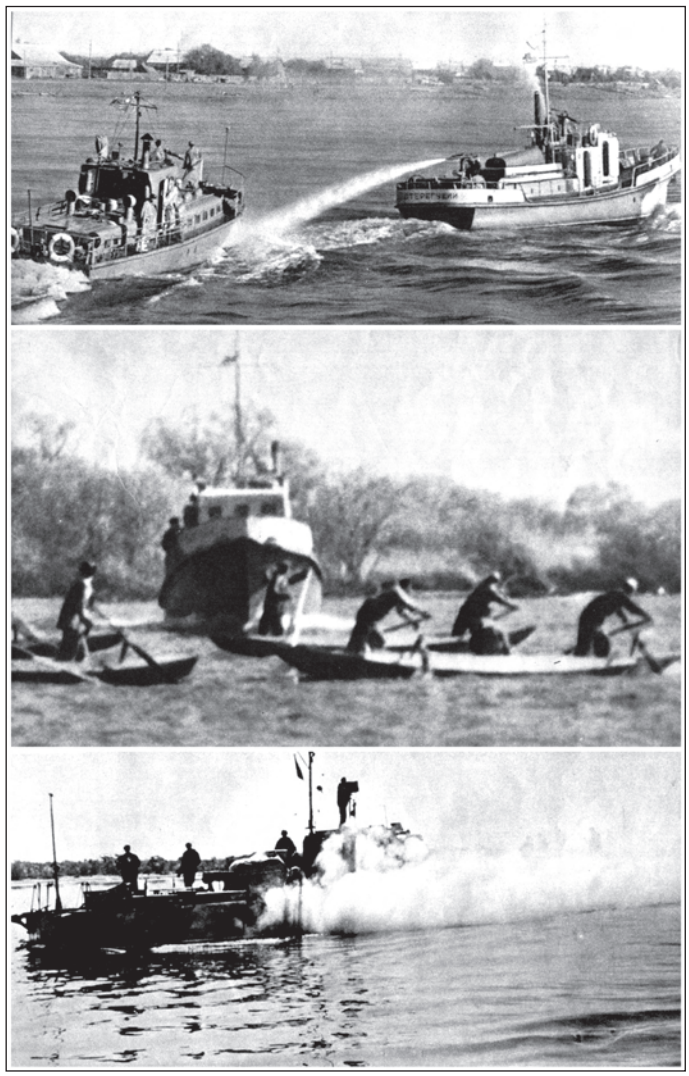


On 23 January 1969, some 70 Soviet border guards, in four vehicles, supported by a helicopter, entered Zhenbao Island. The result was a brawl in which the Soviets captured Chinese guns and equipment. (PLAP 1969)

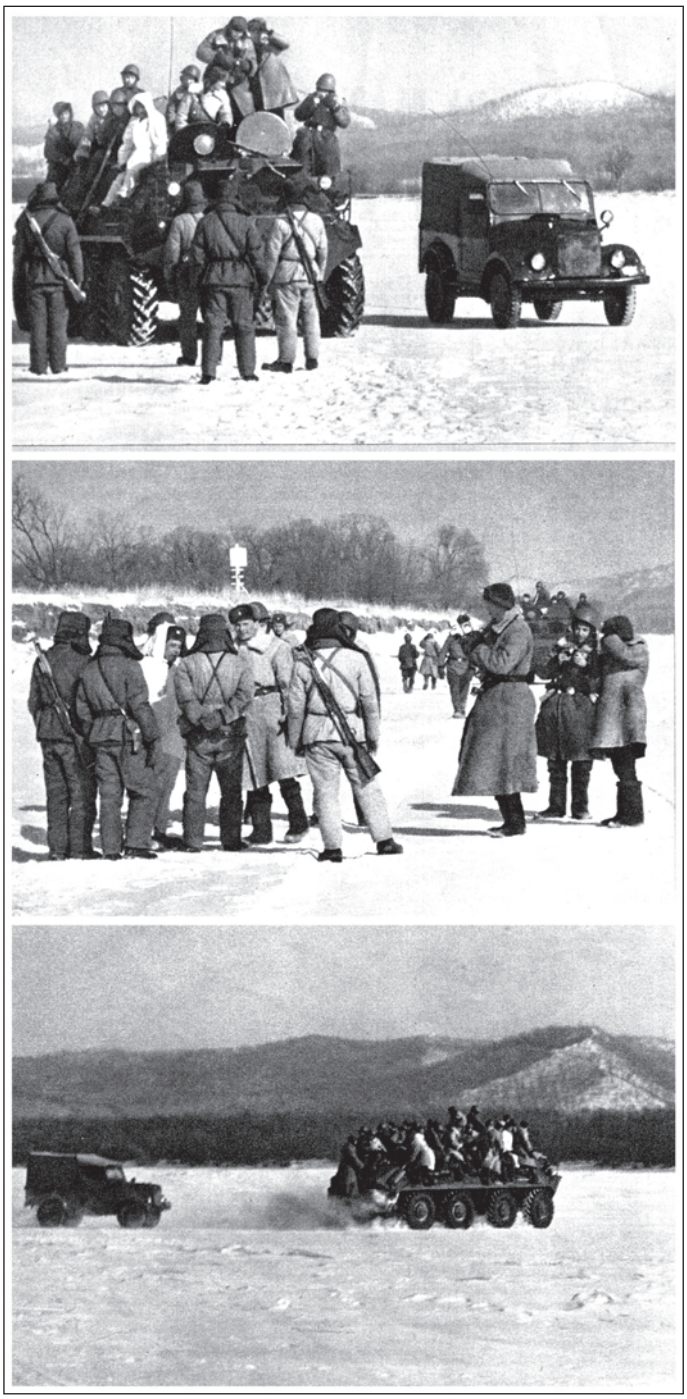
> If the Soviets carry out beatings, we can fight back. But don't open fire. If the Soviets use armoured personnel carriers [APCs], etc., to hit us, we can fight back accordingly, vigorously and resolutely. When the Russians use APCs, etc., to kill and wound our personnel, we counter-attack by blowing up their vehicles and using sticks and bats against their personnel. But opening fire is not permitted. If the Russians open fire against us, we can carry out the most serious resistance, including warning them by firing into the air. If upon two such warnings, the Russians still kill and wound us, our border forces can open fire in self-defence. But this must be done in the spirit of 'first be polite, then fight,' and all resistance must be carried out from within our territory.

Although there was a degree of restraint in the words used by the CMC, it was all guns blazing on the diplomatic front. The Chinese accused the Russians of 'ramming Chinese fishing boats, robbing Chinese fishing nets, turning high-pressure hoses on Chinese fishermen … kidnapping Chinese fishermen,' assaulting and wounding Chinese frontier guards and seizing arms and ammunition, and violating Chinese air space. The accusation was not only one way, but the Soviets also accused China of 488 'deliberate violations of the USSR state border' between June and August 1969, and a later source claims that there were as many as 8,690 border incidents involving 35,000 Chinese, including 3,000 soldiers, between 1965 and 1968.

On 7 February 1969, according to Chinese sources, Soviet soldiers fired at a Chinese patrol party on Zhenbao Island, thus further increasing tensions along the Sino-Soviet border. The CMC cabled the Shenyang and Beijing Military Regions, instructing Chinese frontier troops this time to fight back. They were to choose a suitable time and location but 'fight back only when there is a good chance of winning.' However, the CMC still offered a word of caution and stressed that the battle on the frontier was mainly a matter of political and diplomatic struggles. Therefore, every act of frontier defence was to consider the overall situation and strictly follow the rule of asking for instructions from and reporting to superiors. There was last-minute hope of diplomatic resolution, but in preparation for the worst, a battle plan named 'Zhenbao Island Counter-Interference Struggle Plan,' essentially a continuation of the 1968 preparations for an attack on Qiliqin, was drawn up. On 19 February, the General Staff and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs approved the plan, and the Central Committee of the CCP agreed on Zhenbao as the location.



A familiar scene on the Amur and Ussuri rivers, Soviet patrol boats harassing Chinese fishermen. (PLAP 1969)



A series of three photos by Feng Yongying shows Chinese and Soviet border guards in a confrontation on Zhenbao Island on 7 February 1969. (People's Pictorial, May 1969)

Zhenbao was the ideal place for an attack because it was clearly on the Chinese side of the thalweg and was essentially allocated to China in the 1964 border talks, so its claim of ownership was strong. In addition, an attack at Zhenbao had important tactical advantages for China: the area along the Chinese bank was elevated, thereby giving troops, artillery, and commanders stationed there a perfect line of sight; the Chinese bank was approximately 100m from the island, whereas the Soviet bank was around 400m away; and the nearest Chinese border post was much closer than the nearest Soviet post. The General Staff instructed the Shenyang Military Region and Heilongjiang Military District to 'strive for the suddenness of action,' 'fight quickly,' and 'avoid entanglement.' After achieving victory, the forces were ordered to retreat to a safe location and obtain 'reliable proof,' such as obtaining Soviet weapons and equipment or taking



CCTV Cameraman Feng Yongying as he appeared in 2013, then 73 years of age. Feng was also the cameraman responsible for the pictures taken on Qiliqin Island. (Open Source)

pictures. Mao approved the plan and authorised Premier Zhou Enlai to oversee the operation, and the CMC took direct control of the attack.

After receiving the order from the CMC, Shenyang Military Region and Heilongjiang Military District to reinforce the Ussuri River area with additional troops: two reconnaissance platoons from the 133rd Division (46 Corps) and two other infantry companies from the 67th Division (23 Corps). To coordinate the possible fighting, a forward command post was established at Gongsi liangzi (公司浪子) under the Chief-of-Staff of Hejiang Military Sub-District (合江军分区), Wang Ziliang (王子良). After the shooting incident on 7 February, the Chinese felt that further armed confrontation was imminent and decided to beef up their patrols. Hejiang Military Sub-District would be further reinforced with a reconnaissance company. The order stressed the importance of dominating the area with aggressive patrolling. Each patrol would now consist of no fewer than two, preferably three teams, a reinforced platoon, or 40 men. Orders to the patrols were to stay within the Chinese side of the border at all times, and any actions must use the element of surprise, hit hard, hit fast, and withdraw to favourable areas after victory.

PLA Order of Battle for Zhenbao Island 1969

Senior Command

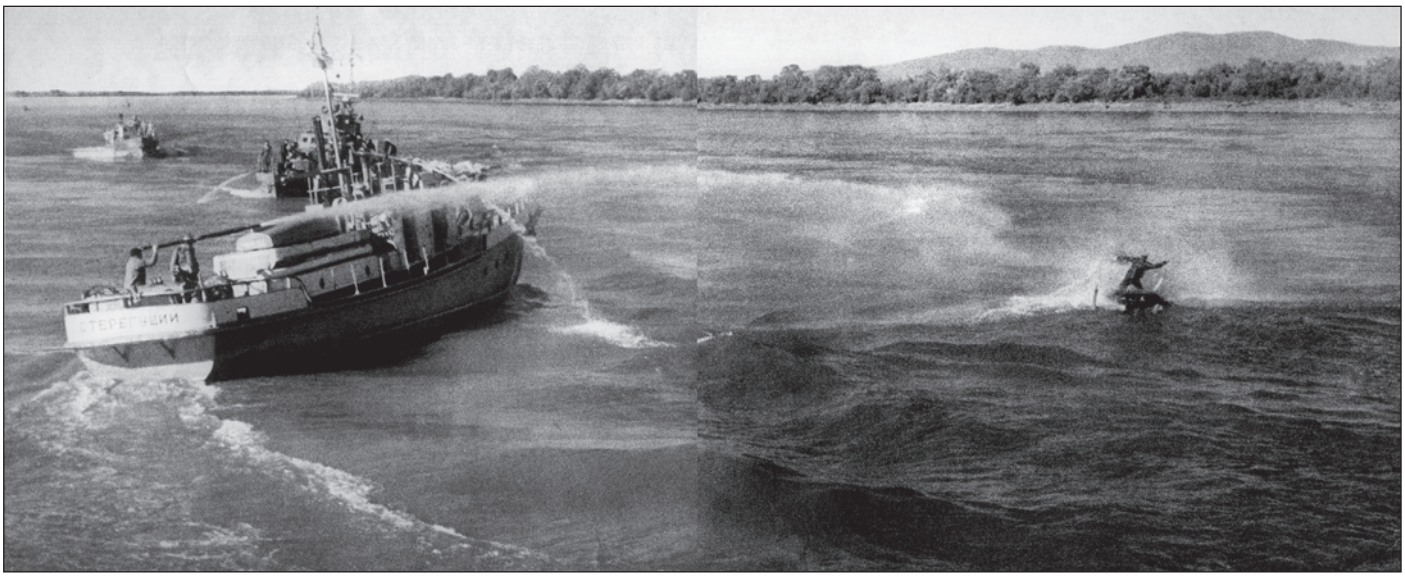
Overall commander: Shenyang Military Region, Deputy C-in-C and Chief-of-Staff: Xiao Quanfu (肖全夫)

Supported by:

i. Heilongjiang Military District, Deputy C-in-C: An Huai (安怀)
ii. Hejiang Military Sub-District, C-in-C: Li Qingzheng (李清正)
iii. Hejiang Military Sub-District, Deputy C-in-C: Wang Shiguang (王世广)
iv. Hejiang Military Sub-District, Deputy Commissar: Chen Sheng (陈升)
v. Hejiang Military Sub-District, Deputy Chief-of-Staff: Cao Jianhua (曹建华) (also on-site field commander)

Field Commanders

i. Operational commanders:



A picture taken during salmon fishing season shows a Soviet patrol boat using water cannon on a Chinese fisherman who tries to retaliate using an axe. This famous picture was taken by Feng Yongying (封永迎), then the resident photographer of China Central TV based in Heilongjiang Province. For years, the photographer's name was unknown as the then rules were to not name the photographer. (PLAP 1969)

   a. Hejiang Military Sub-District, Chief-of-Staff: Wang Ziliang (王子良)
   b. Border Force Director: Wang Jinhua (王锦华)
   c. Raohe Border Post Political Officer: Zhang Caigui (张才贵)

ii. On-site field commanders:
   a. 133rd Division Reconnaissance staff officer:[5] Ma Xianze (马宪则)
   b. Hejiang Military Sub-District, Gongsi Border Post Commander (Acting) and Deputy Political Officer: Sun Yuguo (孙玉国)
   c. Hejiang Military Sub-District, Deputy C-in-C: Wang Shiguang (王世广)

Combat Force

i. No. 1*, 3* Company with HMG Platoon*, Anti-Tank Platoon* (75mm RCL), two 60mm mortar squads, Support Company, 1/217th Regiment
   a. Leng Pengfei (冷鹏飞): CO 1/217th Regiment, 73rd Division, 23 Corps; Li Weian (李卫安): Battlion 2iC
   b. Zhan Jingfu (詹景福): OC No. 1 Company (Red-One Company); Wang Qingrong (王庆容): 2iC; Yang Xuezhong 杨学忠: Political Officer
   c. Zeng Guozhen (曾国珍): OC No. 3 Company; Deng Shuijin (邓水金): Political Officer
   d. Yang Jinxi (杨进喜): Platoon Commander, 75mm RCL platoon; Zhang Shuiping (张水平): Platoon Commander, HMG platoon

ii. No. 1, 2, 3 Battalion and Artillery Battalion, 201st Regiment, 67th Division, 23 Corps
   a. Shang Yanfa (尚衍发): Regiment CO, Zhang Ying (张英) Regiment Commissar

iii. AA HMG Battery, 23 Corps (as infantry)

iv. Reconnaissance Company, 190th Division, 64 Corps
v. Reconnaissance Company, 191st Division, 64 Corps
vi. Reconnaissance Company, 39 Corps
vii. Reconnaissance Company, 115th Division, 39 Corps
viii. Reconnaissance Company, 117th Division, 39 Corps
ix. Reconnaissance Company*, 133rd Division, 46 Corps
   a. Wei Yunshui (韦运水): OC, Zhu Dengjie (祝登杰): Political Officer
   b. Chen Shaoguang (陈绍光): 2iC., Feng Jiuxi (冯久喜): Platoon Commander
x. Reconnaissance Platoon*, 397th Regiment, 133rd Division, 46 Corps
   a. Hongdong (于洪东): Platoon Commander
xi. Reconnaissance Platoon*, 398th Regiment, 133rd Division 46 Corps
   a. Wu Yonggao (武永高): Platoon Commander, Zhou Dengguo(周登国): No. 3 Section Commander
xii. Reconnaissance Platoon*, 399th Regiment, 133rd Division, 46 Corps
   a. Li Zhengdao (李正道):[6] Platoon Commander

Supporting Arms

i. 75mm RCL Support Company* and 120mm Heavy Mortars Support Company, from 200th Regiment, 67th Division, 23 Corps
ii. 2/20th Artillery Regiment
iii. No. 4 and 6 Troop, No. 5 Battery, 2/413th Artillery Regiment – 85mm field guns

2/620th AA Regiment

* Denotes troops involved in the 2 March 1969 battle on Zhenbao Island

3
MEMORIES FROM CHINESE VETERANS

Road to War

Leng Pengfei, the battalion commander who led the main force on Zhenbao Island, remembers how he was ordered to go to Zhenbao Island:

> On 2 January 1968, I was then based in Jixi (鸡西) District in Heilongjiang Province to support production and agriculture duties when suddenly I received emergency orders to head to reinforce the border defences, especially in countering Soviet interference. With my commissar, Feng Xuewen (冯学文), we ordered the battalion to assemble and draw extra ammunition and prepare for possible combat duties. The boys were ecstatic about the possibility of actual combat duties. We instructed all to prepare their wills in case of casualties.

217th Regiment is a combat unit with a proud history. It participated in the Korean War, but since then, the regiment had seen no combat duties, and many, except for a few old and the bold, were new soldiers who had never experienced combat.

Leng was born in 1933 in Hubei province in the central plains of China. He joined the PLA in 1956, was sent to Korea for garrison duties, and in 1959 attended the Beijing Chemical Warfare School and, upon graduation, was assigned to 217th Regiment to the chemical defence platoon as a platoon commander. In 1963 he was promoted to a junior staff officer in the regimental reconnaissance company. In 1964, Leng was made company commander, and in May 1966, CO of 1 Battalion, 217th Regiment.

> On 6 January 1968, Leng and the battalion less two companies, set off by train for Jiamusi[1]. The journey took 17 long hours. Around midnight, we reached Raohe Town (饶河镇), and upon alighting the vehicles, we met up with medical staff from No. 3 Department, 224 Hospital, who came with crates of equipment to reinforce the Raohe (饶河) clinic. I thought to myself; this looks serious. There were no barracks available, and we were told to billet with the town folks, who were all very kind to receive such a big group of uninvited guests at such notice.

Leng knew that the immediate task was to prepare for battle. Although the boys are all acclimatised to cold weather, to give the Soviets a bloody nose with their superior weaponry, Leng knew that the only way to do this was to lay an ambush.

> The following day, I called a meeting of all the officers and NCOs, all wearing cold-weather gear, leather hats, leather overcoats, and gloves. We discussed and tried out ideas on how best to fight in extreme cold. First, we took baby steps, two hours of dry training in the daytime, and gradually extended the time, ending



These three pictures, part of a series, were taken on Qiliqin Island (Kirkinsky Island). No dates were given but it is assumed to be the scuffle that took place on 5 January 1968. The fact that the Chinese had photographers as part of the team on the island may be a sign that they knew something might happen. (PLAP 1969)



A massive brawl on Qiliqin Island (Kirkinsky Island). Note the Soviets APCs had their main armament covered up with a sleeve. However, they could have easily removed it if the situation had turned nasty. (PLAP 1969)

with night training where the temperature would drop as far as -30° plus degrees. About a week later, I ordered a test. The troops will move into the ambush area by 1800 hrs and not exit until 0500 in the morning. In total, 11 hours in freezing conditions. Of the 300 who participated in the test, three had a mild case of frostbite, and two soldiers reacted slowly to commands.



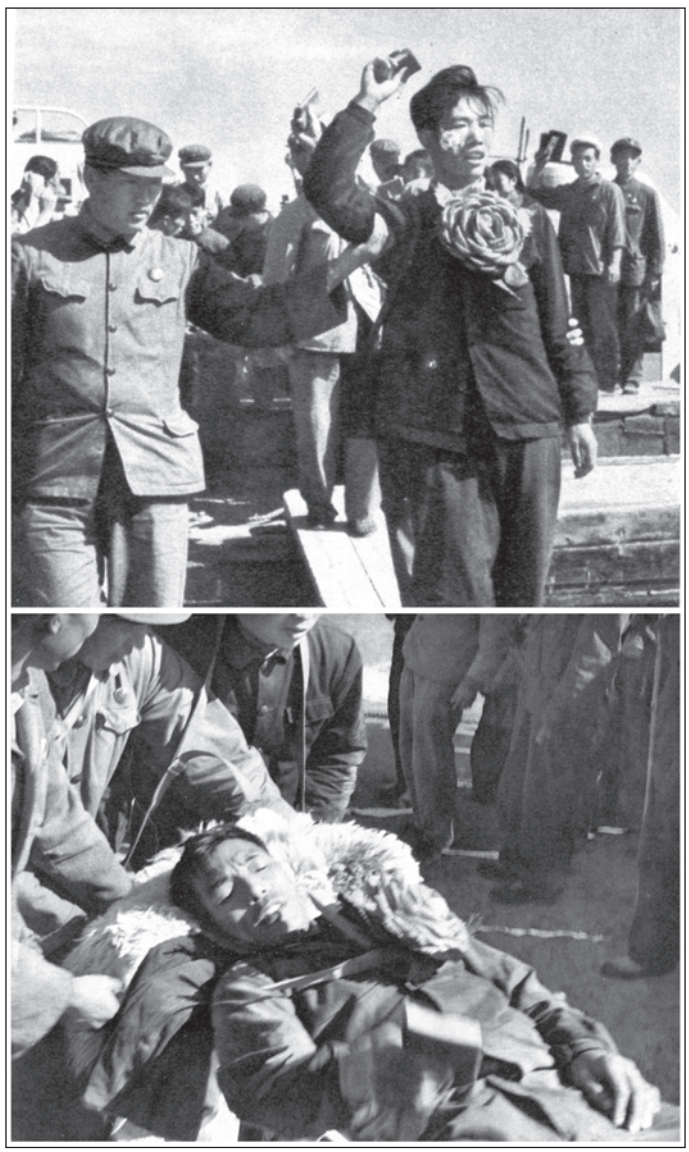
Watercannon, sticks and poles were how Chinese fisherman and the Soviet River Border Guards settled their difference. By claiming ownership of Heixiazi Island (Bolshoi [Big] Ussuriysky Island), the Soviets prevented Chinese boats on the Amur River from sailing to the Ussuri River and vice-versa. (PLAP 1969)

On 24 January 1968, the CMC issued a clear statement on how the Chinese should approach the forthcoming confrontations with the Soviets. Without spelling it out word for word, the gist of the order was this:

> If the Soviets beat us, we can beat them back; but under no circumstances is shooting allowed. If the Soviets try to use their vehicle to rush at us, we can take measures to avoid being knocked down and firmly rebut them, like beating them with sticks, but again no shooting. If the Soviets start shooting at us, we can warn them by shooting in the air. We can shoot back if we begin to take casualties, but it must be in self-defence.

However, the CMC's instruction emphasised 'restraint' in any encounter with the Soviets. With these instructions, at the end of February Heilongjiang Military District, a sub-division of Shenyang Military Region, began to formulate a plan to take the initiative to strike back at the increasing provocation by the Soviets.

> At the beginning of March, I received the order to prepare for action on Qiliqin Island no later than 12 March 1968. However, the weather condition in the area was horrendous. Snow was thigh deep, and the high wind meant in less than 30 minutes, a car could be covered entirely and disappear. Under normal circumstances, the trip from Jiamusi to Raohe takes one day (now it can be done in three hours), but at that time, it took us seven days with 40 tractors clearing the snow to reach Raohe.
>
> On 10 March 1968, at around 1700, we reached our temporary base, a large wood mill. We cut open a few empty oil drums to make a brazier, and the cooks started to cook a much-needed hot meal. At 7 p.m., I gathered all the officers, made a night Reconnaissance to Qiliqin Island, and spent the next day preparing for battle. The next day, after orders and an early dinner, at 5 p.m., led the whole task force to the forming up area on the banks of the Ussrui River and carried out last-minute checks. Chen Shaoguang, the 2iC of 133rd Reconnaissance Company and seven of the toughest and strongest lads, armed with anti-tank grenades (Anti-3 grenades, a copy of Soviet RKG-3) and crossed over to Qiliqin Island, where they immediately started to prepare their hides and ambush position. The aim of the task was simple, to take revenge on the death of five farmworkers who died under the wheels of the Soviet BTR-60PB APC. But seven days and seven nights later, the



On 4 September 1968, five Soviet river patrol boats blocked a Chinese commercial river boat and forcibly boarded the Chinese vessel. Sixteen Chinese sailors were injured in the resulting brawl. This photo shows an injured sailor alighting from their boat. (PLAP 1969)

Soviets did not appear, and the weather was so bad that I decided to call it a day.

If Qiliqin Island was not to be the place to give the Soviets a bloody nose, then it would be another place, and this time, it seems Zhenbao Island would be a good alternative as tensions were rising. On 27 December 1968, the Chinese border patrol under platoon leader Wu Yonggao and 16 other men were surrounded by 75 members of the Soviet border force and severely beaten, resulting in eight men injured and a loss of two assault rifles (Type 56, licensed copy of the AK-47). One week later, on 4 January, there was another violent confrontation on Zhenbao Island. Because of the order by the CMC to avoid unnecessary casualties and show restraint in any fight, the Chinese were naturally at a disadvantage. The Soviets usually had the upper hand in numbers, and this time, the 20 border patrol troops were injured, and the patrol also lost six assault rifles and three semi-automatic rifles (Type 56 semi-automatic rifle – licensed copy of the SKS). On 23 January 1969, Sun Yuguo, the border post commander, and Chen Shaoguang, the 2iC of the Divisional Reconnaissance Company of 133rd Division, were in another such 'fighting' patrol. The following is a summary of the account by Sun Yuguo:

On 23 January 1968, Chen Shaoguang 2iC of 133rd Divisional Reconnaissance Company and Sun Yuguo, border post commander, went on a joint patrol on Zhenbao Island. They set off at 0950 hrs, and when they reached the middle of the island, coming straight at them was a Soviet border patrol truck. Out came nine soldiers with sticks and clubs. Senior Lieutenant Ivan Strelnikov, commander of the Nizhne-Mikhailovskaya outpost, which the Chinese dubbed 'Captain Limpy,' stayed in the truck. Chen Shaoguang went forward to protest, but before he could finish his sentence, he and his patrol were at the receiving end of the clubs. One rifleman, the full name which I can't remember, which I called 'Little Liu,' on account he was the youngest, had his front teeth knocked out! As commander Chen tried to pick 'Little Liu' up, he yelled: "Lads! Get back to the mainland!" We made a hasty retreat to the mainland and nursed our wounds. While we disengaged, the Soviets also withdrew back to their outpost on the other side of the river.

After noon, we returned with a strengthened patrol of 28 men, and again, the 'Captain Limpy' was there. This time we thought we had the upper hand as the Soviets only had 15 men, but the Soviets had dogs with them, so the odds were evened out. Those bloody Russian dogs were ferocious and took chunks off many of the lads. One dog bit me on my chest, but the thick padded winter clothing saved me. However, the bite on my thigh was severe, digging his fangs into my thigh. As the dog lunged at me for the third time, Chen saved me by giving the bloody dog a massive kick and sent it off, yelping! Today I still have the teeth mark on my thigh from that day as a memento! I was lucky, for Rifleman Wan Chuanhe (万传和) was so badly bitten that he couldn't walk and had to be carried off the island.

Later, the Soviets had reinforcement, and their numbers jumped to 74. Several of the lads were so severely injured that we were effectively down to only 20 blokes. I knew they had the upper hand, and we had no choice but to withdraw.

Rifleman Yan Yunlong (阎云龙), who was part of Sun's border post, remembers:

The reason we took a beating on 23 January was that many of the lads on patrol that day were new to the border area and were not seasoned soldiers. Shao Dehong (邵德洪), our cook, was so badly beaten that he was semi-conscious [and] the Soviets tied him to a tree, further humiliated by having snow stuffed down his jacket and pants.

The Soviets beat the Chinese so severely that they managed to take nine personal weapons (six Type 56 assault rifles and three Type 56 semi-automatic rifles). Anyone who has served in the military knows that losing one's weapon is a serious matter. On 23 January, that fateful day, nine weapons were lost, so serious that the incident reached the desk of the high command.



The fight is about to start on Qiliqin Island (Kirkinsky Island). Aside from the *Bekesha Tulup*, some border guards (including the one nearest to the camera) wear a *telogreika* or *vatnik*, a warm cotton and wool padded jacket, part of the winter uniform first issued by the Red Army during the Second World War. Worn on heads are *ushanka* fur hats, real fur for officers and artificial fur for enlisted men. The guard nearest to the camera has a four-cell magazine pouch (on his belt) for his AKM assault rifle (seen slung over his back). The magazine pouch has a small side pocket for the cleaning kit and oil bottle. (PLAP 1969)

Anticipating another potential violent incident, the Heilongjiang Military District decided to reinforce the Hejiang Military Sub-District with extra troops: one reconnaissance company (Divisional Reconnaissance Company from 133rd Division, 46 Corps) and two reconnaissance platoons from 397th and 399th Regiments as well as two infantry companies from 217th Regiment. The straw that broke the camel's back was the 7 February 1969 incident. At about 11 a.m., the Soviets came rushing-in in their armoured cars and, as before, tried to knock down the Chinese Border Force. In a marked escalation of violence, for the first time, aimed shots were fired. The Soviets fired six shots from their AK-47s; luckily, they all missed. Rifleman Yan Yunlong was again a frontline witness of this incident:



Two Chinese dead on Qiliqin Island (Kirkinsky Island). The Chinese claimed the deaths were caused by being run over by the APC. (PLAP 1969)

> As soon as the shots were fired, we immediately withdrew. Our boss told us that we had orders to change tactics. We would not fight the Soviets as before. We were to make our protest and withdraw. The boys were initially mad, not knowing the strategy behind these moves. We pleaded with our bosses to let us fight back. But later, we realised it was a trick to lure the Soviets into our trap. By not fighting back, we hoped it would give them an impression that we are now scared of them, thus encouraging them to take increasingly bolder moves, venturing deep into our zone, and giving us a perfect opportunity to strike back!

The Trap is Set

The incident on 7 February was a watershed; for the first time, shots were fired. So serious that it made it to the meeting agenda of the CMC. One week after the battle, Xiao Quanfu (肖全夫) (1916–2005), then Deputy Commander cum Chief-of-Staff of Shenyang Military Region, was summoned to Beijing. In his briefcase was Cao Jianhua's battle plan. Cao's battle plan was basically an enlarged version of the Qiliqin Island plan, with more men and greater firepower. The plan called for a patrol, acting as bait to lure the Soviets into a prepared ambushed point, and the chosen battleground was Zhenbao Island. In the General Staff Headquarters, Xiao met Deputy Chief-of-Staff Wen Yucheng (温玉成) (1915–1989), who informed Xiao that the battle plan he submitted was approved. Many years later, in an interview, CMC member Wu Faxian (吴法宪) (1915–2004) recalled that it was Mao who approved the plan, seconded by Lin Biao, the Minister of Defence, and Zhou Enlai, the Prime Minister. The CMC recommended that all patrols along the Ussuri River area needed to be strengthened given the rising tension. The CMC also suggested that each patrol should not be less than a reinforced platoon. The Hejiang Military Sub-District would also be strengthened by another elite reconnaissance company, the quick reaction force (QRF), under the control of a senior officer.



The Soviet APC blocks the way of the Chinese truck on Qiliqin Island. The truck is a Chinese-made FAW (First Automotive Works) Jiefang or Liberation CA-30 model, a license-produced Soviet ZIL-157 6x6 army truck. (PLAP 1969)

With the backing of the CMC, the Raohe forward command group worked on the operational plan and, on 21 February, submitted a detailed operational plan to Shenyang Military Region for final approval. In anticipation of pending actions, troops on the ground were busily engaged in a series of pre-deployment training. Semi-automatic rifles were all exchanged for automatic assault rifles. Everyone had to brush up on their anti-tank weapons training, including the cooks who had to be qualified on the Type 56 RPG (copy of the RPG-2). To get the troops familiar with the lay of the land, Cao Jianhua made a huge model of Zhenbao Island. Finally, the troops were all geared up with the latest cold-weather clothes,



On 29 July 1967, 14 villagers from Sanhe Village attempted to cross the border onto Wubalao Island (Kultuk Island) to conduct agricultural work, something they had done since 1945, but were blocked by some 30 Soviet border guards. Soviet guards and Chinese farmers fought throughout 1968 and the first few months of 1969. However, on the morning of 15 May 1969, four PLA border guards patrolled up to Wubalao Island and were met with gunfire from the opposite side of the border. Border guard Ren Jiulin (任久林), a new soldier with less than three months of service, was shot and killed. These two pictures show Soviet border guards fighting farmers who tried to land on the island. (PLAP 1969)

and all were brushed up on cold-weather survival skills. On 26 February 1969, the dice were finally cast. Mao gave the order that operations on Zhenbao Island could begin any time after 1 March 1969. On the same day, all members of the operation gathered for the all-important O Group. In charge of the orders was Li Qingzheng, the commander of the Hejiang Military Sub-District, but for the details of the operation, Cao Jianhua was the man responsible. Cao explained the disposition of the force was as follows:

1. Ambush Position 1, located on the SW side of Zhenbao Island. Troops in Position 1 were all under the command of Cao Jianhua, with Ma Xianze as 2iC. Troops in this position, looking from right to left:
    a. Assault Team (Composite Platoon); 25 men under the command Wang Qingrong.
    b. Raohe Border Post Service Company; RPG.
    c. Reconnaissance Company from 133rd Division.
    d. Reconnaissance Platoon, 397th Regiment.
    e. Half of the Reconnaissance Platoon, 398th Regiment (less 12 men assigned to border patrol as bait).
    f. Reconnaissance Platoon, 399th Regiment.
2. Ambush Position 2, located on the SW side of Zhenbao Island, 100m west of the river channel. This position will be manned by:
    a. No. 1 Company (less 3 platoon) under OC Zhan Jingfu and Political officer Yang Xuezhong.
    b. Ambush force HQ: Leng Pengfei, located at the right-hand side edge of No. 2 Position – Leng is also responsible for coordinating support fire:
        i. 75mm RCL platoon under Yang Jinxi – Right of No. 2 Position.
        ii. HMG platoon under Zhang Shuiping – Right of No. 2 Position.
        iii. Two squads, 60mm mortars – Right of No. 2 Position.
3. Ambush Position 3, located on the western edge of Zhenbao Island, close to the river edge. This position will be manned by:
    a. No. 3 Company under OC Zeng Guozhen and Political Officer Deng Shuijin.
        i. 3 Platoon (Right), 2 Platoon (Centre), 1 Platoon (Left)
4. Border Patrol (Acting as Bait): The force is divided into two teams. Team one will consist of 18 men; to ensure nothing can go wrong, officers will replace the four NCOs. This patrol team will be under the command of SunYuguo. Team two will consist of 12 men from the 1 (four men) and 3 squads (seven men) Regimental Reconnaissance Platoon, 398th Regiment, under the command of Wu Yonggao.
5. Forward Command Post: Located on High Ground 209, located SSW of Zhenbao Island on the mainland. The key personnel were:
    a. Heilongjiang Military District Deputy C-inC: An Huai
    b. Hejiang Military Sub-District C-in-C: Wang Qingzheng
    c. Hejiang Military Sub-District Deputy Commissar: Chen Sheng

The final few hours before H-hour were a tense period. According to Liang Wei (梁炜), a member of the 21st Heilongjiang Construction and Production Regiment (853 Farm) entertainment troupe, recalls:

> We were performing, singing, dancing, and telling jokes for five days non-stop. On the night of 1 March, after their meeting, which we were not allowed to attend, they all went off quietly to gather their things and set off around 8 p.m.

Combat medic Li Xianshu (李先树) from the 397th Regiment remembers his time in Raohe as bitterly cold:

> The bread they gave us was hard as rock. I seem to recall the dinner we ate was quite good, stir fried pork with tofu. Everyone got a packet of biscuits, a white sheet for snow camouflage, a bottle of cough syrup, and a solid wooden stick. Liu Baohai(刘宝海), our political officer, poured some Chinese vodka into our army water bottle. I don't drink, so I gave my share to my mates and brought some boiled sweets instead. It was too hard as rock.

Reconnaissance Platoon Commander Cai Desheng (蔡德胜) remembers the moment before moving out as a time for contemplation. After all, it was his first time to combat:

> I seem to remember that each soldier got only 6 RMB per month at that time. Each soldier saved their last month's pay wrapped it with their clothes together with a will. Some non-CCP members

asked to join the CCP. It was also the first time I paid my CCP membership dues. As I handed the money over, the thoughts stuck in my head were that if I died, this would also be the last time I would pay my CCP dues.

Wang Shangui (王善贵), squad 2iC of the Reconnaissance Platoon of 398th Regiment, was on sick leave when his unit was preparing for war:

When I heard that the lads were going to battle without me, I immediately left the clinic and rushed to Raohe. As soon as I was back, I found my platoon commander, Mr Wu Yonggao, and begged him not to leave without me. After some hard bargaining, he assigned me to his patrol and placed me as the patrol Third-in-Command.

By 2300 hrs, some 200 soldiers were in their assigned position. Each soldier was sheltering in a small shell scrape. Medic Li Xianshu recalled: 'We made a few snowballs to keep our mates awake if we thought they had nodded off!'

4
THE BATTLE BEGINS

2 March 1969: Zhenbao Island

On a sleepless night in the freezing snow with nothing much happening, from a far distance in the southerly distraction came a GAZ-69 jeep. The river was frozen solid, and the car was able to cross the Usurri River and came to a stop just by the banks of Zhenbao Island. Cao Jianhua was able to clearly follow the events using his binoculars. He thought to himself:

Sure to be a battle today. Two men came out of the jeep after talking for a while; a third man came out and gestured to the other two to get back on the jeep. With three men back on the jeep, it drove off.

While the ambush group had a sleepless night in the snow, the border patrol teams enjoyed a warm night in the wood mill. At 8 a.m., 30 members gathered at the obelisk by the Raohe Guard Post, listened to last-minute orders, and sorted out their gear before setting off from Gongsi Guard Post. Sun Yuguo said: 'Lads, today patrol, we will load our weapons. Make ready, but you must all ensure the safety catch is applied.' The boys looked at each other and thought to themselves: 'What's' going on today?' The patrol team, except the officers, were not told of the plot to ambush the Soviets as far as the soldiers were concerned, to ensure absolute security. It was just another regular border patrol. As per the plan, the patrol was to split into two groups.

Group one consisted of 18 men from the Raohe Border Post under the command of Sun Yuguo with Sun Qingyu (孙庆玉), the Chief-of-Staff of Hejiang Military Sub-district as 2iC. To strengthen the patrol, two other officers Xu Lianwen(徐连文), the political officer of Raohe Border Post, and Platoon Commander Zhang Wen (张文) also, joined the patrol as patrolmen. The second patrol team consisted of 12 men from the Reconnaissance Platoon from the 398th Regiment. The patrol commander was Wu Yonggao,



Soviet border guards debussing from the GAZ-63 truck to aid Senior Lieutenant Strelnikov's group. Standing on the roof of Bubenin's BTR-60PB is Driver Kovalev. (PLAP 1969)



Amongst the first casualties of the battle on the morning of 2 March 1969 were the Soviet vehicles. On the left is a GAZ-69 jeep carrying Strelnikov. Next is the burning GAZ-63 vehicle repair truck under the command of Junior-Sergeant Babansky. (PLAP 1969)

and Zhou Dengguo (周登国) was the patrol's 2iC. Before setting off, Sun warned the two patrols 'Under no circumstances will [we] be the first to fire!' At 8:20 a.m. prompt, the two patrols set off, with team one leading, followed by team two with some 200m gap in between. Unlike the ambush group, the two patrols carried no sticks.

Seeing the Chinese on the frozen Ussuri, Private Alexander Shevtsov and Private Vladimir Koyakhov, who were on duty at the Soviet observation post Sopki Kulebyakiny, raised the alert about the Chinese intruders. Senior Lieutenant Ivan Strelnikov and Senior Lieutenant Nikolai Buinevich, the special operation officer, set off in a GAZ-69 staff car. In the staff car was also a cameraman. Following on was a BTR-60PB with 04 written on the side, under the command of Sergeant Vladimir Rabovich, with 15 men. Last but not least was a GAZ-63, a 4x4 2-ton truck equipped as an auto-rescue vehicle. On this were 12 men under Junior-Sergeant Yuri Babansky, who set off late due to some vehicle problem. At 0900 Beijing time, Gongsi Border Post first alerted about the approaching vehicles. Hanging on the side of the BTR-60PB were five men. At 0905, Sun Yuguo's patrol at the south-east corner of Zhenbao Island, was close to the middle of the river, but careful not to cross the midline and stray across to the Soviet side. At 0907, the GAZ-69 staff car and the BTR-60PB APC stopped at the southern tip of Zhenbao Island. According to the Chinese definition of the borderline, the Soviets had already intruded into Chinese territory. At 0908, Sun's patrol group reached the eastern shore of Zhenbao Island, while Wu's second patrol group was at the western riverbank, close to the island's southern tip.

As soon as the GAZ-69 and the APC stopped, out came the troops. Senior Lieutenant Strelikov and Buinevich, with five other men (including combat photographer Private Nikolay Petrov), formed one group and chased after Wu's second patrol. Sergeant Rabovich and 13 other men formed one group and headed toward Sun's first patrol group. On seeing the Soviets coming after him, Sun thought: 'Today we are in business!' Suddenly Sun noticed that today the Soviets seemed to be different; they were not carrying sticks. Instead of shouldering the AK-47 across the back, today, Soviet troops had their assault rifle across the chest. Sun thought to himself: 'Does this mean that the Soviets were gunning for a fight too? Or did they come with the intelligence that the Chinese were up to something?'

As the Soviets came close, Sun shouted his well-prepared warning. 'You are now on Chinese territory; you must leave at once!' Wheater Strelnikov understood this Chinese warning was irrelevant; it was more to alert the ambush-killing group that the prey was near! Sun recalls 'As we had been instructed, the tactic was always not to confront the Soviets and get caught up in fighting but to withdraw as soon as the Soviets showed hostile intentions.' If Strelnikov had bothered to observe, the Chinese patrol routine was always to follow a counter-clockwise direction along the river, but this time Sun's patrol went the other way. The second error Strelinkov made was that he did not send any reconnaissance element forward to clear the path before the arrival of the main force. If Strelinkov heeded the warning, the 57th Imansky Border Guard daily intelligence briefing for 1 March did raise the alert of a possible Chinese provocation. If Strelinkov had taken note, he might have averted walking into an ambush.

Who Fired the First Shot?

At about 0915 hrs, Sun Yuguo's patrol withdrew deep onto Zhenbao Island, close to Position 1. The ambush team was lying in wait just behind the small embankment and could not directly see what was happening but could hear everything in that crip cold morning air, for Rabovich and his party was only some 10m away. Closest to the Soviets were the men from the 133rd Division Reconnaissance Company. About one minute later, Sun shouted: 'Down with the Soviet Revisionists, Protect the Motherland!' This was a pre-arranged signal for the ambush team to act. Platoon Commander Wang Gengan, along with Rifleman Liu Enxue (刘恩学) and a few others, leapt up with sticks and appeared at the rear of Sergeant Rabovich's team. Startled by the sudden appearance of the Chinese, Rabovich's instinct was to defend himself as best he could. Automatically he pointed his AK-47, without aiming, in the air and fired a few shots. Rabovich turned and ran for a few steps, paused, and then fired again, this time towards Rifleman Liu Enxue.

The rules of engagement the Chinese laid down were very strict. Under no circumstances could the Chinese be the first to fire. As a result, the ambush team had to sling their weapons over their backs and only carry a stick in their hand. But as soon as gunfire sounded, the restriction on shooting was lifted. Rabovich's second volley of fire hit Wang Gengan in the stomach and penetrated Wang to hit



Right, Combat Hero Hua Yujie (1944–2017) and his RPG No. 2 Yu Changhai (于长海), who was awarded a Third Class Citation award. Hua uses a Chinese copy of the Soviet RPG-2 rocket-propelled grenade, which is known as Type 56 RPG. Despite scoring several hits, the Type 56 RPG could not penetrate the armour of the T-62. Left: Hua's heroism was remembered by a stamp issued in 1970. (PLAP 1970 and author's collection)



Two Chinese teams are stalking their prey. Hua Yujie (foreground) is seen here along with his RPG No. 2. Hua is seen carrying the launcher and a purpose-built backpack containing three grenades, and an assistant armed with a rifle and carrying another three-grenade backpack. (PLAP 1970)

Liu Enxue in the chest. Almost immediately, further firing was heard, and four members of Sun's patrol were also hit. On seeing his comrades falling like ninepins, Rifleman Duo Jinrong (多金荣), from the minority Daur tribe, leapt up and hit one of the Soviet border guards with his stick. Duo lashed out so hard that the stick broke, and the Soviet guard collapsed. In a split second, Duo dashed forward to try and snatch the AK-47 but was cut down by other Soviet border guards.

Duo died instantly. He was 22 years old. On hearing the gunshots, Cao Jianhua immediately gave the order to shoot. He looked at his watch; it was 0917 hrs. The first to fire from the Chinese side were two light machine gun (LMG) gunners, Li Canrong (李灿荣) and Sui Zhixiang (隋志祥). Soon after, Li's No. 2 (assistant gunner), Xiang Zhicheng (向志成), was hit, and Li stood up in anger, holding his Type 56 LMG (a copy of the Soviet RPD) on his hip and firing multiple bursts at the Soviet guards. Being so exposed, Li was soon hit. Squad Commander Guo Yuncai (郭运才) from No. 1 Squad fired two shots but managed to hit three Soviet guards, and Rifleman Lv Xingyou (吕兴友), also from No. 1 Squad, also managed to find his mark and hit one border guard.

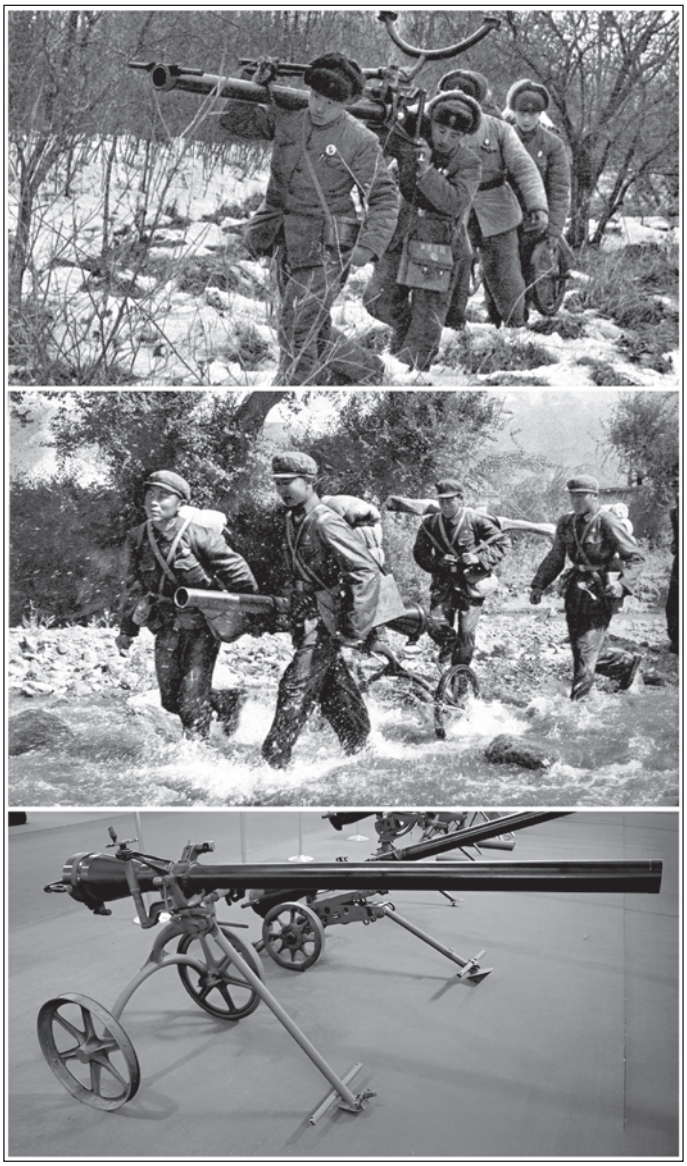
Lance Corporal Pavel Akulov led his squad closed on Sun's No. 1 Patrol. The Chinese were so well camouflaged that one soldier from Akulov's squad was literally on top of the ambushers and stood on men from No. 8 Squad. Chen Mingduo's (陈明多) was lying in ambush with a white cloak as camouflage. Chen leapt up but was shot immediately. Du Yongchun (杜永春), the political officer from 133rd Division, shouted from the top of his voice: 'Comrades, it's time to honour your country!' and led the charge toward the Soviet guards. Du remembers the whistling sound of bullets as they missed him. He paused, saw a couple of Soviet guards in the woods, and tossed two grenades at them.

On Position 2, battalion commander Leng Pengfei ordered the RCL Platoon commander Yang Jinxi, to 'Engage!' No sooner had he given the order to fire than the RCL bellowed a giant woosh sound and hit the GAZ-69 jeep. The driver of the BTR-60PB scuttled back into the vehicle, closing the hatch cover behind him and driving the APC quickly to the island to rescue his mates but the deep snow slowed the APC considerably. At 0921 hrs, the APC, without noticing the Chinese, came just a bit too close to Position No. 2 and came within range of Yang's guns. Three RCLs opened fire and hit the BTR-60 in the centre without damaging the engine. Bellowing smoke, afraid of being hit again, the APC headed as fast as it could back to the Soviet side of the Ussuri River.

Death of Senior Lieutenant Strelinkov – Memory of Wu Yongguo

While Sergeant Rabovich's patrol was caught in an ambush, Senior Lieutenant Strelinkov's patrol headed straight toward Wu Yonggao's patrol. In June 2015, Wu said in an interview:

> When Strelinkov and his group came toward him, he first noticed three men were carrying their rifles on their shoulders. These three were different from the others, as their AK-47s did not have the signature banana-shaped magazine fitted. Maybe they were hoping to use their rifle to beat us?
>
> In those days, there was an unwritten rule that officers had to be in the front leading their men, so I had to lead from the front. I opened my strides and walked fast; soon, I opened up a gap, some 10m, between my team. As I got closer, I soon recognised the man in the front. It's 'Captain Limpy!' I shouted: 'This is China! You have crossed the border; go back to your side!' Since the incident on 7 February, orders were to avoid any possibility of confrontation with the Soviets. But this time, it's different!
>
> Strelinkov headed straight toward Wu without uttering a word and tried to grab me by the rifle sling. In return, I grabbed Strelinkov by the collar of his leather coat with my right hand and, with my right, punched Strelinkov in the face. He fell back! I think he was shocked that the Chinese dared to hit back. Just as I landed Strelinkov a punch, suddenly, we heard gunfire. Everyone was startled. Zhou Dengguo, my patrol 2iC, recognised that this was the signal. He immediately unslung his rifle, released the safety catch, and opened fire at the Soviet guards. I saw three border guards fall down. The rest of my patrol joined in. Suddenly Strelinkov, who was holding on to my rifle sling with force just a second ago, his hand went limp. His face scrunched up in agony and collapsed by my feet. For a moment, I was lost in what was happening. Moments later, I realised Strelinkov was shot. Suddenly, I realised I was hit too; blood was oozing out; I felt weak and had to sit down, but I was still conscious. I shouted at Zhou. 'Get the men down; take cover!'



PLA anti-tank team carrying a Type 56 75mm RCL (top left). Unlike the US M20 RCL, the Chinese version had an option for a two-wheel carriage weighing 34kg (centre and bottom), with a total combat weight of 87kg. (PLAP 1970, and author's photo, Benjamin Lai)

Exposed on the frozen river, Zhou realised he was in a difficult situation and immediately turned and led his team toward the island for better cover; as he was extracting his team, the patrol was exchanging fire with Akulov's men. Squad 2iC Wang Shangui (王善贵) was shot during this gun battle and died instantly. At 0925, Cao Jianhua ordered the two patrols to withdraw immediately. Cao himself also began to relocate to the command post on the island. After the battle, Wu, who had been lying on the ice all this time, was recovered by a stretcher party. By the time Wu got to the aid station, Wu was already unconscious due to the loss of blood.

With the benefit of hindsight, the GAZ-63 truck engine trouble probably saved the life of Junior-Sergeant Yuri Babansky. When Babansky heard the gunshot, he immediately took cover but due to the lay of the land, he could not see much and decided to push ahead with two others to see what was happening. What he saw shocked him. Sergeant Rabovich's teams had been completely wiped out. Babansky decided to take revenge and fired a few aimed shots. On the receiving end of Babansky's accurate fire were men from the Assault (Composite) Platoon. Surprised by fire from a totally unexpected direction, the Chinese were unprepared, and



An artist's depiction of Combat Hero (posthumous) Sun Zhengmin doing his demining task. The mine in front of him is a POMZ stake-mounted anti-personnel mine triggered by tripwires. (PLAP 1970)

a few sustained injuries. Squad Commander Yu Wanchun (于万春) recalls:

> Company 2iC Wang Qingrong shouted at us: 'You [me], you and you follow me!' Wang dashed into the wood and launched a flanking attack on the Soviets. As we skirmished forward, bullets came flying at us quick and fast. Our boss was startled, but he carried on. I followed close behind, shouting: 'Boss, you are hit!' Wang ignored me, or was it he didn't hear me? I have no idea, but he carried on and took cover behind a tree. He let loose a few shots. Suddenly one of the lads who came with me, Shen Yuping (沈玉平), collapsed in the snow. The boss shouted: 'Shen, are you hit?' Shen was in agony. The snow turned red, Shen was bleeding. Later, we discovered that Shen was suffering from chronic enteritis, but he did not want to miss out going to war and did not tell anyone.
>
> Wang pointed to Rifleman Si Chunshan (司春山); 'You go to help Shen.' But to get to Shen, Si had to cross open ground and expose himself to oncoming fire. Wang was closer and dashed



Combat Hero (Posthumous) Yu Qingyang (1944–1969). The *de rigueur* Mao badge seen on every soldier's chest is not an army badge or any part of any military regulation. This badge is one of the more popular styles of the times. (PLAP 1970)

forward to put a shell dressing on Shen. In doing so, Wang was hit again. Si shouted at Wang: 'Boss, you are bleeding!' Wang replied: 'Don't bother about me! Over there, I saw an enemy. You go and sort it out!' Wang turned to Sui Zhixiang, the LMG gunner. 'Give covering fire!' We successfully suppressed the Soviets with additional fire.

Xiong Yuanhua (熊远华), the squad 2iC of the No. 3 Squad, suddenly appeared amongst us. After finishing all his rounds, he and a few lads dashed forward, pulled out a grenade, and lobbed it toward the enemy. He then ran ahead and scrounged three magazines amongst the dead bodies. Xiong was back in the game.

Our boss was bleeding badly and collapsed into a coma. Zhao Yongzhi (赵永志), the Squad Commander of the No. 8 Squad, the next senior guy in our group, took over. Zhao told Sui, the gunner, and Qiu Jinming (邱进明), squad 2iC, now gun team controller: 'You two, keep the Soviets' heads down while I'll take six blokes and try to flank them; from the right.'

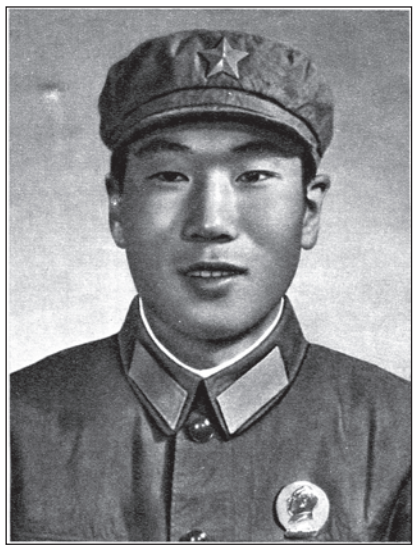
The Chinese had the upper hand in both numbers as well as superior firepower. Soon it won the day, and as the Soviets took casualties, they stopped firing. In the lull of the fighting, Babansky took this opportunity to scuttle back to the GAZ-63 truck but found the truck seriously damaged and on fire. Low on ammunition, Babansky dispatched one man as a runner to return to the border guard post for help.

Soviet Help Arrives

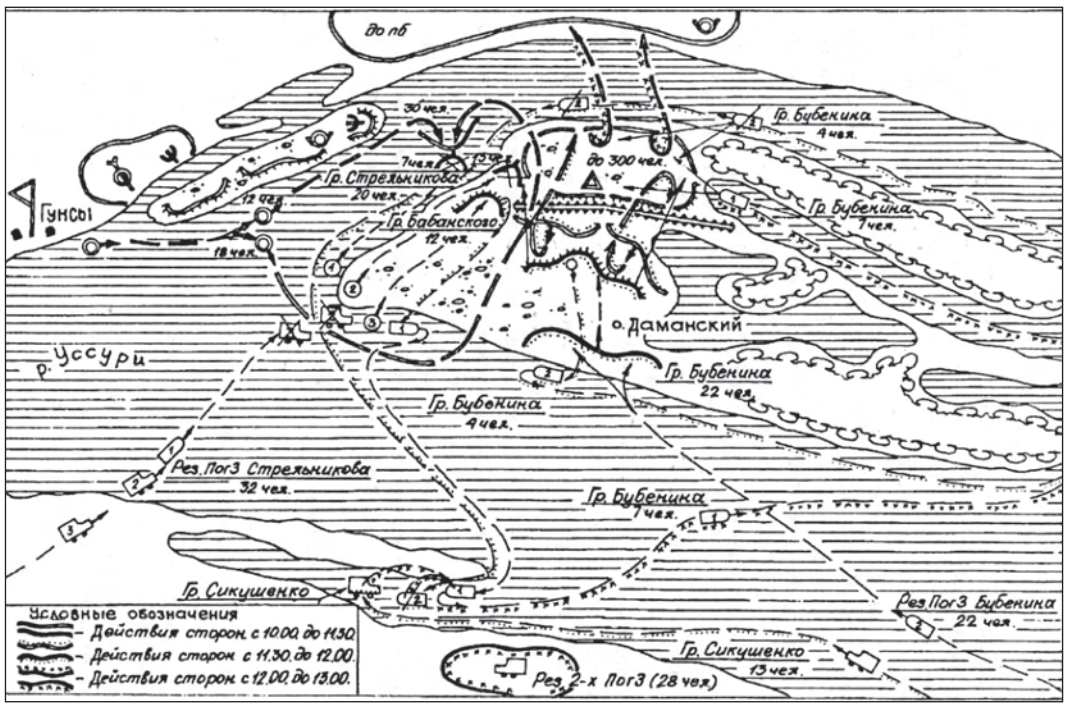
When the help did come, it came in the form of another BTR-60PB, with the number 01 stencilled on the side, and 22 border guards. At approximately 0940 hrs, BTR-60PB 01 arrived on the north-eastern tip of Zhenbao Island. Penetrating deep into the island, the APC soon came within range of the Chinese; 7.62x39 mm bullets found the mark and made pinging sounds on the APC's sides. In this era of political upheaval, many Chinese soldiers were rusty on their basic military skills, and the platoon and squad commanders were no better. In their first time in combat adrenalin got the better of them and a charge at the Soviets was ordered without adequate covering fire. On the BTR-60PB was a heavy machine gun, and the Soviets were all down in prone positions. The ill-conceived charge was met with a hail of bullets, and several Chinese fell, and in a panic, some turned and fled. Luckily cooler heads in Positions 2 and 3 laid suppressing fire at the Soviets and inflicted several casualties. By 0951, the BTR-60PB turned into the inner channel of the Ussari River and began heading south. It caught Sun Yuguo's patrol in the open and managed to injure four of the Chinese.

Ma Xianze, now in command of 133rd Division's reconnaissance force shouted: 'Shoot the bastard!' Raohe Border Post cooks had been drafted in at the last minute to make up the numbers of the RPG team and they had minimal training; shooting at a moving target was a subject they had not had much practiced. The first round missed, and so did the second and third rounds. Du Yongchun, the political officer from 133rd Division, recalls:

> In the midst of the heavy exchange of fire, a Soviet APC came hurtling toward me. At that time, I was giving orders to my soldiers when bullets began hitting the trees around us. I shouted: 'Get Down!' But while all the boys hit the deck, I was still standing, waving my arms about. Then suddenly, a heavy branch fell on me. It was then I took cover!



Combat Hero (Posthumous) Yang Lin (1944–1969). He joined the PLA in August 1962 and was made Section Commander in 1965. Yang could have escaped death when in 1967, he had the opportunity to leave the army after being seriously injured in training; however, he rejected this option and decided to stay in the army. (PLAP 1970)



This Soviet military map shows the track and location where the GAZ-69, GAZ-63 and APC (vehicles 1, 2, 3 on the left side of the map) stopped and the site of the ambush on 2 March 1969, as well as the withdrawal track of the surviving APC. (Public domain)

At 0957, APC 01 entered the area close to Position 2. Chinese RPG teams were trying to aim at the metal monster when 75mm recoilless anti-tank guns from Yang Jinxi's platoon managed to score a hit on the right side. Immediately the APC slowed. Before it could turn, a second RCL round hit the armoured car. It was severely damaged but still managed to move.

By 1030, the firing began to die down, and Cao Jianhua gave the order to sweep the battlefield for any remaining Soviet resistance. Soon after, he ordered the withdraw signal flare to be fired. The wounded were CASEVACed out one by one. As Cao was checking his watch, the field telephone rang. It was from the forward command post on High Ground 209. Cao recalled the message being: 'Did you get any Russian POWs? If you get any Russians still alive, that would be great for propaganda value.'

He immediately made a quick sweep of the battleground with a squad of men. The Chinese were beginning to clear up the battlefield, and in the pile of dead bodies, one Soviet border guard let out a moan as he was being lifted. 'This one is not dead!' One of the Chinese soldiers shouted. 'Get this man back for immediate medical attention' Cao shouted. But while the wounded border guard was placed on the stretcher, he passed away. By 1040, Cao and the last of the Chinese troops began to move off Zhenbao Island. But just as Cao was making their way back to the mainland, a GAZ-69 jeep, closely followed by an APC, BTR-60PB No. 4, came charging towards Zhenbao Island.

The reinforcement led by Sergent Pavel Sikushenko was here. The Soviets raked the Chinese position with fire as they withdrew, picking up the wounded and stragglers as they went. Little did they know that the Chinese had bugged out already. Just as the two injured border guardsmen, Nikolay Puzyrev and Anatoly Aniper came on board APC No. 4 was hit by another 75mm anti-tank round and showered with HMG and mortar fire. APC No. 4 was on fire, and all had to abandon the vehicle. The destruction of APC No. 4 marks the end of the first phase of the Battle of Zhenbao Island. The last of the Chinese troops began to move back at 10.55 am.

5
LICKING THE WOUNDS

Soviet Response

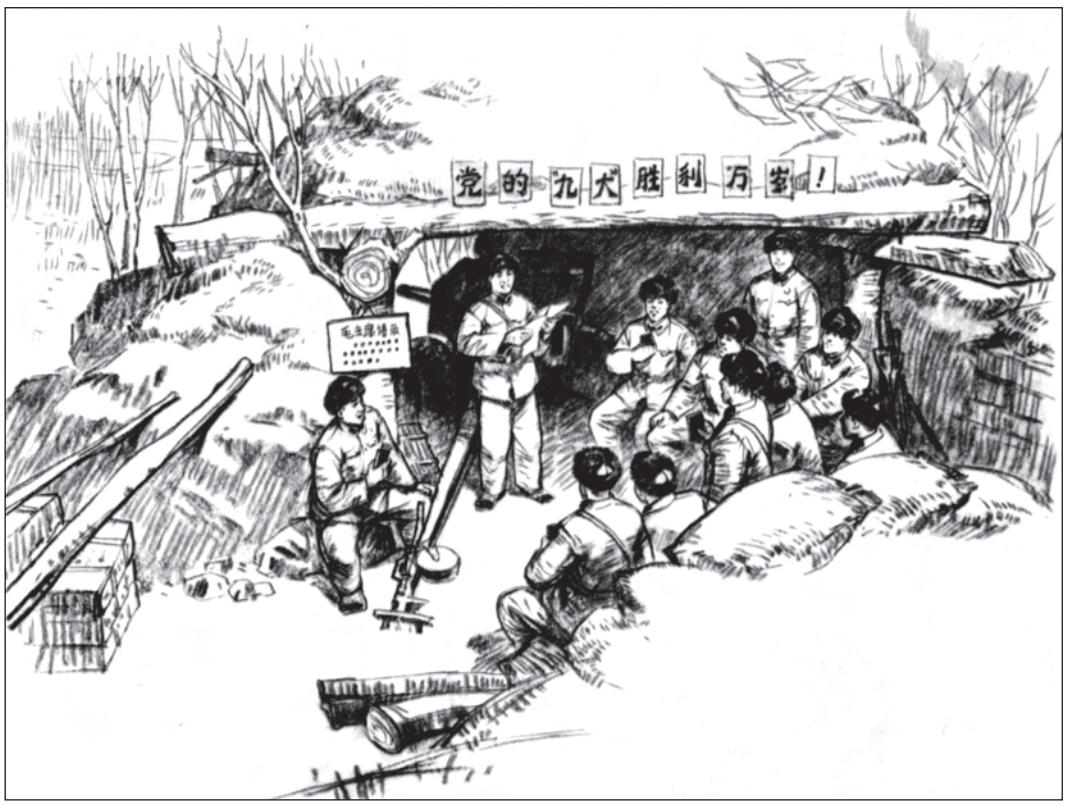
Chen Xilian (陈锡联), then the commander of Shenyang Military Region, recalls how he was instructed to meet with the Soviets while the battle was going on:

> The Chinese counterstroke against the Soviet continuous provocation at Zhenbao Island was not limited to a military strike but a complete plan encompassed diplomatic leverages, gaining the high ground in the world's public opinion. We forced two meetings, one at 9.25 at Raohe Border Post and another at Hutou (虎头) Border Post at 9.40. The Soviets agreed to both meetings, not knowing that a hot battle was ranging at Zhenbao Island.

Caught on the back foot, the Soviets came totally unprepared and were forced to listen to a barrage of Chinese accusations and had little to respond to other than reading from a list of standard replies. Chen continued:

> We requested another meeting with the Soviets in the afternoon. The method to communicate with the Soviets was based on signal flags. The 'request meeting' flag was hoisted, and the Soviets immediately accepted it by hoisting their flag. The Chinese told the Soviets they could come to pick up their dead at the appointed time, and the Chinese would not open fire.

Armed with a white flag of truce, the Soviets came to the island gingerly and picked up the Soviet dead. Some Soviet bodies seemed



All armies employed military artists to record their battles, which also applies to the Chinese. This pencil/charcoal drawing is one of the many sketches done by military artists. Unfortunately, at that time, it was not the tradition or the practice to name the artist; therefore, we will never know who did this excellent artwork. The banner on the top of the bunker is a political message to congratulate the success of the CCP 9th Party Congress, which was held on 1–24 April 1969, giving us a time when this sketch was made. (PLAP 1969)



A Chinese movie poster announcing the Zhenbao Island documentary. (Public domain)

to have been cleared of documents as none of the dead had their military ID card on them. Petrov, the Soviet combat photographer's movie camera, was missing, but his Zorky-4 camera was somehow missed by the Chinese and was left behind. In the Soviet search team was a photojournalist Vladimir Grechukhin (Владимир Прохорович Гречухин) from the *Pacific Coast Border Guard News* (*Пограничник на Тихом океане*) revealed in an interview that he switched camera with Petrov as it was the same model and kept the film and only recently released the pictures to the Border Guard Museum. According to the subsequent Soviet news release, they had 32 killed and 15 injured. On top of that, the loss of one APC, a GAZ-69 jeep, and a GAZ-66 truck. The Chinese claimed to have captured 14 AK-47 rifles, two pistols, and one movie camera (but not Petrov's still camera).

According to post-battle roll-call, the Soviets collected 31 bodies, but of the 50 who went out, only 18 were left standing, and 32 were missing. Who was missing? The missing soldier was Corporal Pavel Akulov. Soon after the battle, speculation began to fly about what had happened to Akulov. Accusations ranged from being caged and paraded like an animal to being thrown out of a helicopter and were widely circulated in Soviet gossip columns but no facts could be brought to shore up these wild charges.

The truth as to why Akulov was taken back to the Chinese side can be found in a call Cao Jianhua received at 10:30 a.m. on 2 March. The Chinese wanted POWs, and the reason Akulov was carried off to the Chinese side and the rest (the dead) were left on the island can only be explained by the fact that Akulov was still alive. The Chinese wanted a POW to be paraded on newsreels, alive and kicking. So, the assertion of torture in the Soviet press runs counter to logic and the specific instructions by the high command. Unfortunately, Akulov died before he was able to receive medical help. The Chinese were not the only ones to carry off the enemy's dead by mistake. The Soviets also took Rifleman Chen Jingli (陈景立), a soldier from the 133rd Divisional Reconnaissance Company, by mistake. After all the dust had settled, on 17 April, arrangements were made by both sides so that Chen's body could be returned and Akulov's be sent back for burial in the Soviet Union.

On the other side of the country, the news of the border clash soon reached the desk of Leonid Brezhnev, the General-Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party. On his desk were two reports, one from the KGB, the other from the Soviet Army Chief-of-Staff. The two reports were at totally opposite ends of the spectrum. So who was right? Which report was he going to listen to?

Brezhnev called the chief-of-staff of the Soviet Border Troops (Пограничные войска СССР), Lieutenant-General Vadim Matrosov at home:

> Brezhnev: 'What's going on over there? Is this war?'
>
> Matrosov: 'Secretary-General, let me fly there and find out. I will then give you a full report.'
>
> Brezhnev: 'No, No, you tell me now! The combined chief-of-staff tells me there are signs of war.'
>
> Matrosov thinks to himself: I now understand what he wants; he wants me to convince the Army.

Matrosov said: 'According to ours and the Army's intelligence report, I have not received any report of Chinese military concentration near the border. In fact, the Chinese first line of troops is very far from the border. I won't, for now, classify this as a top priority matter.'

After I [Matrosov] said this, Brezhnev was clearly relieved. On the same day, Alexei Kosygin, the Soviet Premier, telephoned the Far East Military District commander, Colonel-General Oleg Losik asked the same question. Losik said there was indeed an armed clash. I am implementing emergency measures as he speaks.



The Soviets were also mobilised to denounce the Chinese. One of the signs says 'Shameful Chinese provocateurs', another says 'The shameful Mao Zedong Gang'. (Public domain)

From the above, it seems that the Soviets were caught by surprise. In the biography of Brezhnev,[1] according to Russian author Leonid Mlechin, the Soviet high command was in a state of confusion. Yuri Andropov, the head of the KGB, regarded this as a matter entirely a border problem, and the Army should not be involved. However, the hawkish element of the military, General Vasily Margelov of the VDV (the Soviet Airborne Forces), even suggested attacking Beijing by airdropping parachutists on China's capital. Luckily on that day, clearer heads prevailed. Brezhnev realised that even if the Soviets won militarily, how could they control or govern a country with 700 million people. What will this lead to? Nuclear war?

American academic John W Lewis said:

> We could see that the Chinese, especially the CMC were in complete control of the situation. Mao and Zhou Enlai, the Prime Minister, had first-hand information on which to base their decision. In contrast, the Soviet politburo was at a loss about what was happening. The first emergency meeting of the Soviet Politburo was held four days later, on the 6 of March. The Chinese were clearly in charge and in control of events.

On 3 March, the Soviets formed a fact-finding mission with Chief-of-Staff Lieutenant-General Vadim Matrosov of the Border Troops, Colonel-General Nikolay Zakharov, First Deputy Chief of the KGB, and Major General Vasily Shchur, deputy head of the KGB Directorate of the Border Troops. The Head of the Iman Border Detachment of the Border Troops, Colonel Demokrat Leonov, made the report. The fact-finding commission from Moscow visited Zhenbao Island, albeit under heavy protection, to see the battleground for themselves. The commission counted 306 depressions in the snow and thus assumed the Chinese had around a battalion, 306 men, committed to battle. Evidently, the Soviets were not going to leave the provocation by the Chinese unattended. First, the border defence needed to be beefed up. After all, the Soviets, including Brezhnev himself, were concerned that this unprovoked Chinese attack was a precursor to a full-scale invasion. Second, the Chinese needed to be taught a lesson, and the border guards' deaths needed to be avenged.



Mass demonstrations became almost a daily activity; 'Down with the New Tsar' was a popular slogan of the period. Soviet commentary accused the Chinese soldiers and civilians of swapping clothes to confuse the Soviets. However, the reality is that the whole country wore just one style of clothes, often referred to as 'Mao suits' in the West; After all, due to the Cultural Revolution, the country was desperately poor. It was not until the late 1970s that colours other than green or blue were seen in the streets. (People's Pictorial, May 1969)

On 2 March, the Soviet Forces in the Far East, especially the Baikhai Military District, went to high alert. Troops in Mongolia, the two motor rifle divisions, went on a heightened state of readiness. Troops closest to Damansky Island, 135th Motor Rifle Division, then based in Lesozavodsk, a city on the Ussuri River's banks, were ordered to reinforce the border troops detachments around Damansky Island. 135th Motor Rifle Division was a reduced-

strength unit, meaning its equipment and troops were not at full strength. Two companies, numbers 4 and 5, from the 2nd Battalion of the 199th Motor Rifle Regiment, the best equipped and closest to full strength, were chosen to reinforce the Sino-Soviet border. On arrival at Iman Border Detachment, Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Smirnov, CO of 2nd Battalion, 199th Motor Rifle Regiment, split the force in two. No. 4 Company, a 120mm mortar battery, and part of the signal squad remained at No. 2 Outpost. No. 5 Company, with the anti-tank platoon and the remainder of the signal squad, was to join Smirnov at Outpost No. 1, and No. 6 Company was to act as the tactical reserve. In order to bring the Iman Border Detachment back up to full strength in the shortest possible time, men were extracted from 52nd, 58th, 60th, 62nd, and 69th Border Detachments, as well as 12th Training Border Detachment, and were all rushed to Damansky Island. In addition, three Mi-4 helicopters were dispatched to Iman.

The commission's report led to a lot of soul searching as to why the Soviets were caught with their trousers down. Lieutenant-General Vadim Matrosov admitted that the Soviets ignored many signs of impending trouble. The Chinese were building up forces around Damansky Island one week before the crisis and they even built roads leading to Damansky; and these were all ignored. As demanded by standard operating procedures, only one officer was present on that fateful day instead of three. This omission was very much the result of complacency as the Soviets had managed to map out the entire Chinese military net, call-signs and frequencies, radio procedures included. Therefore it was a massive blunder when increased signal traffic was missed by the Border Force intelligence. To make up for lost time, the Soviets ratcheted up theatre surveillance by dispatching Tu-16s as well as the emergency launch of several Zenit photo-reconnaissance satellites, while tactical reconnaissance was conducted by the 131st Independent Reconnaissance Battalion. According to Senior Lieutenant Bubenin in his memoirs, by 13 March, two days before the second phase of the battle, the Soviets had ascertained the Chinese military deployment as follows: an infantry regiment, 24th Infantry Regiment, estimated at 5,000 men strong with additional artillery support (estimated 10 tubes) in the vicinity of Damansky Island, another infantry regiment with tanks in support in the area opposite to Iman, two battalions in the area opposite to Lazo, one reinforced battalion in the area opposite to Pavlo-Fedorovka.

In preparation for the forthcoming second clash over Damansky Island, the Soviets brought in the heavyweights to the fight; the Soviet Army equipped with tanks and heavy artillery.

The Soviet Order of Battle is as follows:

Senior Commander

Deputy C-in-C Far Eastern Military:
Lieutenant-General P. M. Plotnikov
Deputy C-in-C Pacific Border District, Operational Group Command: Colonel G. Sechkin

Combat Force

2nd Battalion, 199th Motor Rifle Regiment:
No. 4 Company, 2 Outpost
No. 5 Company, 1 Outpost
No. 6 Company, Reserve
9 x 120mm Mortar Battery
6 x T-12 100mm Anti-Tank Company
378th Artillery Regiment
1st Battalion, 12 x 122mm M-30 Guns
2nd Battalion, 12 x 122mm M-30 Guns
3rd Battalion, 12 x 152mm D-1 Guns
13th Independent MBRL Battalion
Two batteries, 12 x BM-21 MBRL
152nd Independent Tank Battalion
One company, 9 x T-62 Tanks

In Support

10th Independent Air Regiment, Border Troops, 5 x Mi-4 Helicopters (an increase from three)

On Standby

57th Border Guard Detachment
58th Border Guard Detachment
69th Border Guard Detachment
77th Border Guard Detachment

Chinese Reaction

The Chinese propaganda war began as soon as the last bullets were fired. The official communique from the Chinese Embassy in Moscow issued a strongly worded statement accusing the Soviets of violating the border leading to Chinese armed responses to the repeated provocation. The editorial by *People's Daily* published an equally hard-hitting editorial. Egged on by the state media, a mob began to gather outside the Soviet Embassy in Beijing on the morning of 3 March, and the embassy was surrounded by mobs for the next four days. Demonstrations not only occurred in major cities such as Shanghai, Tianjin, and Harbin but also in other cities across China. It was estimated that by 12 March, over 400 million people participated in anti-Soviet demonstrations of some kind.

However, the Soviets were not idle either. The first anti-Chinese demonstrations appeared in the Far Eastern Region. Protests



All over the country, workers were organised into mass demonisation. Here steel workers stopped working to 'participate' in mass demonstrations, with obvious repercussions for productivity. (People's Pictorial, May 1969)

occurred in large cities such as Vladivostok and Baku, and by 7 March protests occurred in Moscow. As in Beijing, the Chinese Embassy in Moscow was surrounded. Stones were thrown into the Chinese Embassy breaking windows and it was estimated that 100,000 people participated in the Moscow demonstrations.

When the Chinese embarked on this risky venture against the Soviet Union, they knew that the Soviets would not take this lying down and would definitely seek revenge. Even before drawing the first blood, Shenyang and Beijing Military Regions, the two military districts bordering the Soviet Union, already had forward battle command HQs set up and ready for further trouble. In addition to military personnel, the military command had staff from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs embedded in their organisation. For example, in the Shenyang Military Region, commander Chen Xilian worked hand-in-hand with Qiao Guanhua (乔冠华)[2] from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, each supported by a cohort of staff and assistants in a joint command HQ inside West Bejing State Guest House. We can see that the Chinese came well prepared for this crisis, with resources covering not only the military dimension but also the diplomatic and public relations front.

On 3 March, Shenyang Military Region reported to the CMC proposing a defensive line stretching from Qiliqin Island (Kirkinsky Island) to Zhenbao Island (Damansky Island). Over the next two days, 4–5 March, Mao and the generals of the CMC deliberated on the pros and cons of different strategies. Mao was quite firm on what plans the CMC should adopt in the second Battle of Zhenbao Island. The second battle would be an enlarged affair, and the Chinese troops in and around Zhenbao Island would be augmented by one infantry regiment, three artillery battalions, one signal squadron, 16 reconnaissance companies, and heavy mortar batteries and HMG companies. These combat arms would be supported by appropriate logistics and support troops. An enlarged force required a more senior commander to command, and this man was Xiao Quanfu (肖全夫). Born in 1916, Xiao joined the Red Army in 1932. By his late teens, Xiao was already a platoon commander. Injured by a shell, Xiao walked with a limp, and by 1948, he was already a divisional commander, and at 36, he was already a corps commander in Korea. His success in the 1953 summer offensive earned him a place at the Panmunjom armistice negotiations.

Just before the clock struck 12 on the close of day on 2 March, Xiao had two unexpected visitors at that late hour. Chen Xilian recalls this meeting:

> I saw Xiao Quanfu with my political officer, Zeng Shaoshan (曾绍山). We told Xiao straight; you have been appointed the field commander of the forthcoming Zhenbao Island battle. You will be assisted by Li Shaoyuan (李少元), deputy director of the political department of Shenyang Military Region, and as time is pressing, you will depart for the front line tomorrow. I further emphasise that Xiao needs to remember that this battle has to be fought with political and diplomatic considerations. When to fight, what to fight, and how to fight must be done according to CMC instructions. Your tactic plans must ensure that the battle is fought on the Chinese side of the border, and the Soviets must be lured over to cross into Chinese territory. The killing ground must be inside Chinese territory.

With seven of his staff, Xiao departed for Jiamusi (formerly: Kiamusze or Giyamusi), a border city located along the middle and lower reaches of the Songhua River, facing Russia's Khabarovsk Krai across the Ussuri River. From Jiamusi, a jeep took the team to



Two members of the Chinese coastal militia. The nearest man is holding a Sten gun while the man behind has an M3 Grease Gun. While the regular PLA had the latest Type 56 (AK-47) assault rifle, the militia, being second-line defence, has to make do with hand-me-downs from the Second World War. (People's Pictorial, May 1969)

Wulindong (五林洞), a town located some 20km from Zhenbao Island. In Wulindong, Xiao met up with Cao Jianhua, Ma Xianze, and Sun Yuguo and listened to their first-hand report of the previous day's battle. On 6 March, Xiao and his team climbed High Ground 209 that overlooked Zhenbao Island and surveyed the battleground.

With the result of this initial reconnaissance under his belt, Xiao issued the following directives for the forthcoming battle:

> Fifteen units will be deployed with the primary objective of conducting the anti-penetration battle. Two companies of the 217th Regiment, 73rd Division, will continue their deployment on Zhenbao island as before. 133rd Reconnaissance Company and three reconnaissance platoons, one HMG platoon, one 82mm mortar company, and one extra platoon of 75mm RCL anti-tank guns. One infantry company will be deployed in Gongsi, and the rest will be in Wulindong. Hejiang Military Sub-District, C-in-C Li Qingzheng, will command the forces listed here.
>
> The battle in Qiliqin Island (Kirkinsky Island) will be the responsibility of five reconnaissance companies from 39 Corps, two anti-tank companies of 75mm RCL guns, one 120mm Heavy Mortar company, and one HMG company. Forces in Qiliqin will be under the command of 117th Division 2iC Li Weizhen (李维珍.)
>
> Forces guarding Hutou's (虎头) region will be the responsibility of three companies of Reconnaissance troops from the 16 Corps supported by local militia from Hutou. These troops will be commanded by officers from the Hutou Border Post.
>
> In support will be two battalions of guns from 20th Artillery Regiment, 7th Division.
>
> In reserve, one infantry regiment and two reconnaissance companies from 64 Corps will be held back at Dadaihe (大岱河) area to support battles should they be needed. On standby will be an 85mm field artillery battalion as well as one AA gun battalion.

By 9 March, Xiao's forward command HQ was up and running, and the first agenda of the newly established HQ was to hold a battle planning conference. At 0800 on 10 March, the conference kicked off with Xiao Quanfu in the chair. All the department heads and those who were in the thick of it on 2 March were in attendance. One of the lesser-known features of the Chinese PLA is that their battle plan is always the result of the consensus of key personnel. This tradition originated in the Red Army during the revolutionary war in the 1930s and is still very much used in the modern PLA.[3]

Xiao was the first to speak and outlined his initial thinking and deployment directives. He explained that the military district commanders had emphasised the second phase of the battle on Qiliqin Island instead of Zhenbao Island. What set the Chinese PLA aside from other armies is that senior commanders often welcome their subordinates to challenge their decision. After Xiao finished his opening statement, he invited the floor to comment. The first to reply was Cao Jianhua, the commander of the initial phase of the battle. Cao said:

> Commander, I beg to differ from the plan you outlined, and in my opinion, the emphasis should be on Zhenbao and not Qiliqin Island. My reasons are as follows:
>
> In any future battle, the Soviets will be sure to fight with tanks and APCs in the lead; this is, after all, their trump card. But the lay of the land on Qiliqin Island is not suited for tanks and APCs. Second, the land on the Soviet side surrounding Zhenbao Island has much high ground that enables the Soviets to overlook the island and, more importantly, dead ground that allows their army to hide and prepare for battle. Third, is the frozen river; let their tanks and APCs drive across to Zhenbao Island. The island's banks are flat and flush with the ice surface, making crossing easy. Fourth is that the Soviets want vengeance, and Zhenbao Island has to be where they seek revenge.

After estimating the probable cause of actions by the Soviets, Cao turned to the Chinese:

> First, Zhenbao Island is flat, allowing us to have easy command and control over the entire island. We can also see all the approaches to the island and thus see the Soviet points of attack as soon as they break cover. Second, the lay of the land on our side allows us to hide our approaches, especially from the north and south, so any flanking attack to hit the Soviets on their sides is concealed until the last minute. The third key point is that High Ground 209 will allow us to see unrestricted onto Zhenbao Island. It is a perfect command post and artillery OP.

Cao continued:



Xiao Quanfu, Shenyang Military Region, Deputy C-in-C and Chief-of-Staff, seen here on the right, raising his right arm. The picture was taken at the 1969 National Day parade. The vehicle is a BJ 212, China's Answer to the Willys Jeep. (Private collection)

> Anti-tank will be our first priority. Anti-tank mines and AT guns will take out their tanks first, and then our RPG teams will deal with any leftovers. These fires must be overlapping and interlocking to be effective.

Cao's forthright opinion generated a lot of murmur in the room. Some agreed, but some were also against changing the plans laid down by higher command. After a lot of heated discussions,



After the battle, Zhenbao Island became a must for many soldiers posted to the area. Here, the tour guide explains to young soldiers the site where Combat Hero Yang Lin was killed. Note the battle-damaged tree in the centre of the photo. (PLAP 1970)

even banging on tables, Xiao spoke and said that Cao's combat appreciation made a lot of sense and agreed with Cao's plan. Xiao wanted the same team, which fought on 2 March, to be included in this forthcoming battle. Again, Cao would be given local tactical command. Once the decision was made to place the primary battle on Zhenbao Island instead of Qiliqin Island, the debate turned to battle strategy and tactics. The deputy artillery commander of Shenyang Military Region and engineers' commander entered into a heated discussion about whether to put emphasis on constructing concrete pillboxes or having more guns on the ground.

After much debate, the PLA commanders unanimously agreed that destroying the Soviet tanks and APCs was the key to winning the battle. The critical factor in weakening the lethality of the armour was to separate their infantry from the armour. Without infantry support, tanks were 'blind' and vulnerable to ambushes by RCL and RPGs. Another consensus was to separate the two islands, Zhenbao being one battle under one command and Qiliqin being another separate battle with its own independent command.

Xiao placed Li Weizhen (李维珍), 2iC of 117th Division, in command of the Qiliqin battle to support the reconnaissance battalion of 39 Corps in close support. Xiao said:

> Li, I wanted you to start patrolling Qiliqin Island from tomorrow with or without seeing any Soviet incursion on the island. Your job is to give the Soviets the impression that our primary battle will be fought on Qiliqin Island. Your current command post and unit deployment will be moved forward 1 to 1.5km, deliberately letting the Soviets 'see' our troops and movements. The Soviets may have formidable tanks and APC, but their rigid tactics can only operate according to plans. They are not good at thinking on their feet about rapid changes of plans.

Li Shaoyuan (李少元), the second in command of the tactical HQ, then made a short speech about the need to get the soldiers in the right frame of mind for the forthcoming battle. For many, this would be their first real battle, probably seeing dead bodies for the first time. Many so-called soldiers were rusty in their military skills, having been 'working' in factories for the last few years. They needed to learn about their adversaries, their tanks, their tactics and how they fought, battle security, leaks of information, signal silence, and barracks required to be locked down. Finally, Ma Xianze, the 133rd Divisional staff officer (reconnaissance), spoke to other commanders new to the Ussuri River area about having cold-weather gear ready and teaching the soldiers how to prevent frostbite. Last he urged the soldiers deployed on the island in ambush positions to have cough pills ready to stop coughing, giving away their position.



This Type 56 pistol (copy of a Soviet Tokarev TT-33) formerly belonged to Combat Hero (Posthumous) Wang Qingrong (1940–1969). The officer is making a political talk to his troops about the heroism of Wang. (PLAP 1970)

To wrap up the conference, Xiao Quanfu announced beefing out the units deployed to the battle. First-line deployment to Zhenbao Island would increase from three to five companies of infantry. In addition, two independent platoons would be added to the Order of Battle. As per the consensus, destroying Soviet tanks and APCs would be the crux of the battle, and as such anti-tank units would be increased from six to 26 units (12 x 75mm RCL, 12 x RPG teams, 2 x 85mm AT guns). The meeting minutes were then typed-up and sent to CMC for approval.

On the dawn of 13 March, Xiao Quanfu, An Huai, the Deputy C-in-C of Heilongjiang Military District, and a number of the key commanders climbed onto High Ground 209 for a survey of



Soviet weapons and equipment captured after the first battle on Zhenbao Island. There are at least 14 AKM assault rifles, including an AKMS with a folding stock. Note that several helmets show penetration by bullets. Often the public misunderstands that the helmet can protect against bullets; in reality, it is there to protect from impact shock and small steel fragments (shrapnel). (PLAP 1969)

the battleground when without warning, three Soviet tanks were spotted driving on the frozen Usarri River. Chen Xilian, then the commander of Shenyang Military Region, called Beijing; Deputy Chief-of-Staff, Wen Yucheng, answered the call. 'Boss, if the Soviets come to the inner part of the river, do we shoot?' Wen replied: 'Shoot. Xiao ordered the 82mm mortar on Hill 135 to fire on the Soviet tanks. The mortars landed too closed for comfort, and the Soviets turned and scuttled back to their side of the river.'

However, since 2 March, the Soviets had been regularly seen on Zhenbao Island. On 7 March came six APCs and three helicopters; on the 10th, one APC and 14 soldiers were spotted on Zhenbao Island. Three Soviet APCs again drove onto the island two days later. All these intrusions were of short duration, and at no time did the Chinese and Soviets exchange fire until the morning of 13 March, when Xiao ordered mortars to be fired.

On the night of the 13th, Xiao and all key commanders met again to discuss that morning's incident. Cao Jianhua again led the discussion by expressing his opinion that, in his view, the battle would occur very soon, probably in one or two days. The Soviets would likely use their tanks to penetrate into the inner part of the river to separate the island and the mainland to isolate the troops on Zhenbao Island with a view of totally annihilating them. The outcome of this second battle conference was to fine-tune the troops' deployment by upping the anti-tank defences. The anti-tank company from 3rd Battalion, 201st Regiment, would now move forward to Position 3, a piece of land on the Ussuri riverbank, just north of High Ground 209, south-west of Zhenbao Island. First-line ammunition would need to be scaled up, and more work needed to be done on camouflage. AT mines were to be laid in key approaches. This would be carried out by Sun Zhengmin (孙征民), deputy chief clerk of the 2nd Military Industrial Zone of Shenyang Military Region, assisted by men from the 201st Special Duties Company and the Reconnaissance Platoon from 397th Regiment. Finally, Yu Hongdong would be the forward eyes and ears by deploying a squad from the Reconnaissance Platoon of 397th Regiment, 133rd Division, to establish a hide on the island.

Eve of the Battle

Mines, which played a crucial part in the subsequent battle, came almost as an afterthought to the Chinese. The laying of mines only took place on the night of 14 March, just a few hours before the battle. The frequent incursion by the Soviets beforehand had given the Chinese a good idea of the likely path the tanks and APCs would travel, so it was easy for the Chinese to know where to lay their minefields.

The order was to have all the minefields laid by 2300 hrs. To have this job done by this tight deadline, Sun Zhengmin had with him two assistants, Chen Yan (陈雁) and Liu Baohai (刘宝海), all experienced combat engineers from Shenyang Military Region. At 1900 hrs, the three teams assembled at the foothill of High Ground 209 after an hour of traveling by truck. The team quickly picked up two Type 59 AT mines, weighing 8.5kg each. The mines came with Type 51 fuses with a tripping pressure of 200–700kg and were capable of blowing off the tracks of any Soviet tank. Luckily the freezing fog hid much of their movement from the Soviets, but despite illuminating the island with spotlights, the Chinese were



Top: Sun Yuguo was honoured to meet Mao and Lin Biao at the 9th CCP Party Congress. Note how the censor highly doctored this picture. The background was entirely blacked out. Bottom: The actual scene at the 9th CCP Party congress. (PLAP 1970 and public domain)

never spotted. However, laying mines in snow and ice is not as easy as shovelling a molehill of snow onto the mines. Digging into the ice or the solid permafrost was out of the question without power tools. Furthermore, digging sounds travel fast, and the nearest point of the Soviet border was only 400m away from Zhenbao Island. Luckily Rifleman Zhou Xijin (周锡金) from No. 5 Reconnaissance Squad, 397th Reconnaissance Regiment, had a bright idea. Why not put the mine into a white pillowcase. Even if the wind blew the snow away from the mine, the white pillowcase could still hide the mine. After some 40 minutes of hard work, six minefields with a total of 72 mines were laid.

On arrival back at the mainland, Yu Hongdong, a platoon commander from 397th Regiment, exhausted from the laying six minefields, was called to Cao Jianhua. Cao ordered Yu to take one squad back onto the island, protect the mines, and cover the morning patrol. Cursing his bad luck, Yu pondered for a minute which was the 'lucky' squad he should assign. The lucky squad assigned to a freezing night without sleep was No. 4 under Shi Rongting (石荣庭). When the squad assembled for the roll-call, instead of nine men, in the lineup were 10 men. 'Who is that?' The darkness hid the masked faces. 'It's me, Du Yongchun (杜永春); I am the political officer of the 133rd Division.' Yu was perplexed. 'Why are you here, Sir?' 'Someone needs to keep an eye on you!' Du said jokingly. Yu knew that there must be something more. Senior officers usually did not go on ambushes, especially not when the temperature was -20°C. 'But if he wants to be frozen like a popsicle, that's his business,' Yu said to himself. With another officer in the team, Yu decided to divide the squad into three teams; Yu, Du, and Shi each take one group, hidden along the embankment on the island's west side in what was known as Position 1.

By 2100 hrs, the bulk of the troops, except the mining teams, were all in their battle positions. The command team was located on High Ground 209 (approximately 1,100m south-south-west of Zhenbao Island on the mainland) with the artillery OP. In close vicinity protecting the HQ, there were AA HMGs. On Zhenbao Island, in Position 1, was one reconnaissance squad from 133rd Division under platoon commander Yu Hongdong. In support of Zhenbao Island were No. 1 Company (No. 3 Position, approximately 500m south-west of Zhenbao Island on the mainland) and No. 3 Company (No. 2 Position, approximately 500m due west of Zhenbao Island on the mainland) of 1st Battalion, 217th Regiment, and the reconnaissance platoons from 397th, 398th and 399th Regiments. Co-located with No. 1 Company were the HMG platoon, 75 RCL platoon, and 133rd Reconnaissance Company. Elements from 67th Division were in reserve, and the alternative command post was located at Spot Height 358 (approximately 2,000m south-west of Zhenbao Island on the mainland) along with senior officers from 67th Division. 2,000m north-north-west of High Ground 209 on a nameless hillock were the 120mm heavy mortars from 200th Regiment, while the 82mm mortars were located 1,000m north-west of High Ground 209. The RCL AT gun platoon from No. 3 Company, 3rd Battalion, 201st Regiment (less one AT platoon) and the QRF and battle reserve were all located to Spot Height 192, 2,500m north-west-west from High Ground 209. The field guns from the 2/413th Regiment were at Spot Height 150, 3,500m north-west of Zhenbao Island. Other assets deployed were 75mm RCL guns from No. 1 Company, 1/201st Regiment (less one AT platoon) was held back as the AT reserve at the nameless hill, 1,000m north-west of High Ground 209, ready to reinforce No. 2 and No. 3 Positions.

On Qiliqin Island, the Chinese had four reconnaissance companies (115th and 117th Reconnaissance Companies from 39 Corps, and 190th and 191th Reconnaissance Companies from 64 Corps), two RCL AT companies, and one company of 120mm mortars and one HMG company.

6
ROUND TWO, 15–17 MARCH 1969

Road to War

Whether by luck or design, both sides choose 15 March as their D-Day for the second round of battle for Zhenbao Island. From all available information and with hindsight, if the Soviets decided to start their battle just a few hours before, on the 14th instead of the 15th, the result of the fight may have been totally different. In the second round, the Chinese battle winner, 12 anti-tank minefields, were only completed at 2300 hrs, and the Soviet forces started their battle preparation for the 15th at 0105 hrs (Moscow time 0305 hrs).

At 0220 hrs (Moscow time) on 15 March 1969, the 57th Imansky Border Guard Detachment received their operational order 001. The order was:

Situation Enemy:
The Chinese have deployed two reinforced battalions of infantry force with the intention to defend and occupy the whole of Damanasky Island. The Chinese infantry will have in support RCL and man-held RPGs. The Chinese are expected to have mortars and artillery support coming from the mainland.

Situation Friendly Forces:
The main infantry force from the 57th Border Guard Detachment and three companies from the 2/199th MR Regiment, Soviet Army, and their APCs.

Armour support: One tank company of the 152nd Independent Tank Battalion, Soviet Army.

Anti-tank: One Anti-Tank Company equipped with 100mm AT guns from the 2/199th MR Regiment, Soviet Army.

Artillery Support: provided by 120mm Heavy Mortars company from 2/199th MR Regiment and two battalions of 122mm field guns as well as one battery of 152mm field guns from the 378th Artillery Regiment, Soviet Army.

Counter Battery Fire: two batteries from the 13th Independent MBRL Battalion, Soviet Army.

Mission: Capture Damansky Island by destroying all enemy forces on the island.

Execution
General Outline: Damansky Island will be captured by a pincer movement with one force (mainly infantry in APC attacking from the NE and one infantry force supported by tanks coming from the SE)

Tasks: The NE force will consist of one reinforced platoon (45 men) from 57th Border Guard Detachment in four APCs (one SPG-9 RCL AT gun, two RPG-7s, two PKS HMG, and four RPK LMGs)

The SE force is formed by No. 4 Infantry Company 2/199th MR Regiment, supported by two troops of tanks. Both from the Soviet Army.

Counter Attack Force: One infantry company (No. 5) from 2/199th MR Regiment Soviet Army, on standby with No. 6 Company 2/199th MR Regiment, also from the Soviet Army in reserve.

Reserve: 80 men from the 57th Border Guard in seven APCs (armed with SPG-9 RCL AT gun, RPG-7s, PKS HMGs, and RPK LMGs). The reserve's mission is to secure the start line and assembly area and cover attacking forces advancing to Damansky Island.

Supporting Fire: Providing direct support, one battery of mortars from 2/199th MR Regiment. AT force, provided by the 100mm guns, will provide AT suppressing fire if Chinese amour is seen. The 120mm and 152mm guns will provide long-range artillery support, while the MBRL will suppress enemy artillery by providing counter-battery fire. All these are Soviet Army assets.

Administration: All forces must be at the assembly area by 0300 hrs, and all battle preparation must be completed by 0400 hrs. Occupation of the stepping-off point no later than 0520 hrs.

In the early hours of 15 March, Lieutenant Colonel E.I. Yanshin led the four BTR-60PBs over the start line and trod toward Zhenbao Island. The snow was deep, and the going was slow. They arrived at the appointed spot much later than planned. The Chinese were nowhere to be seen. Orders were given to conduct reconnaissance by fire, by shooting at likely Chinese hiding places.

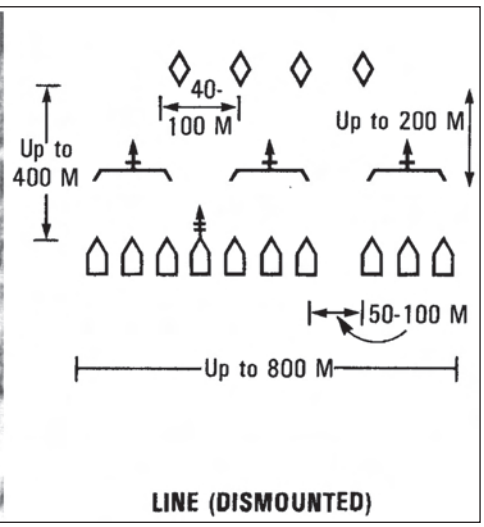
All this happened under the watchful eyes of Yu Hongdong, who was lying in wait for the better part of the freezing night. Yu knew the Soviets had infrared night-vision devices and dared not lift his body to look. At 0405 hrs, Colonel Yanshin reported back. After he was satisfied that there were no Chinese on the island, he ordered three men to alight the APC and check for any signs of Chinese troops or defences. The heavy snow and low light made visual inspection difficult, but the reconnaissance team did spot some footprints from Yu Hongdong's team when they deployed to the island on the previous night. Alarmed by the news, Colonel Yanshin then ordered the whole detachment to conduct a more systematic search. Split into four teams, the border troops made a quick reconnaissance of the island, but they did not discover Yu Hongdong and his men. The activity of Yanshin's men could not escape the eyes of the watchful Chinese, and Cao Jianhua ordered the AT QRF team, No. 3 Company 75mm RCL platoon, to deploy to Position 3.

At 5am, the silence over the whole Zhenbao Island area was suddenly broken by a female voice speaking perfect Russian through



Militia and civilians were a central part of the PLA. They provided essential logistic and administrative support to the PLA, a tradition that stems from the earliest days when the forerunner of the PLA, the Red Army, was fighting a guerrilla war against the Nationalists and the Japanese. On Zhenbao Island, the success of the Chinese in overwhelming the Soviets despite the inferiority in weaponry was due to the Chinese being able mobilise the local militia and civilians to provide food, essential supplies and medical care. (PLAP 1969)





Soviet infantry attack dismounted, supported by BTR-60PBs. The standard Soviet dismounted attack places the APC in the rear, slightly behind the infantry in extended line formation, following the tanks (if available). Due to the restricted space, in this case in Zhenbao Island, hindered by trees, the ideal attack formation was not always possible. (PLAP 1969 and FM100-2-1, Soviet Army Operations and Tactics 1984)

a bank of loudspeakers located on the Chinese side of the Ussuri River. From the recollection of Soviet soldiers on the ground, the announcer had to be Russian, for the Russian was perfect, spoken just like a local. But the propaganda war was not a one-sided affair. The Soviets soon answered back with their broadcast, except that the Russian announcer's Chinese was so bad that most of the Chinese soldiers on Zhenbao Island could hardly understand what was said. After a two-hour ear-splitting propaganda battle, the Chinese loudspeaker suddenly went silent; soon thereafter, the Soviet loudspeakers followed suit.

Load, Make Ready!

In the early morning of 15 March, everything seemed normal. The Chinese standing patrol for Zhenbao Island was assembled on the parade ground, ready for inspection before setting out on a normal day of patrolling. However, this was not a normal day as Chinese intelligence had gained information that the Soviets, too, had troops on the island lying in wait. If the two sides met, there was sure to be bloodshed. To be sure, the Soviets would have to pay dearly for any blood spilt. As before, the Soviets must be seen to be the 'bad guy.' In anticipation of the impending battle, the Chinese decided to deploy No. 1 and 3 (less one squad) companies from 1/217th forward to the high ground just north of High Ground 209. To back up Yu Hongdong's men who had been lying in wait in the freezing snow with some AT capability, Battalion Commander Leng Pengfei led one infantry platoon (2 Platoon of No. 3 Company, less No. 6 Squad) plus one AT squad with RPGs onto the island. By 0730, the men from 1/217th were ready for battle in Position 2. But these movements were all observed by the Soviets.

At 0730, Leng Pengfei, CO of 1/217th Regiment, took a call from Cao Jianhua.

> Cao: 'We have report of about 60 Soviets in six APCs having landed on the northern part of the island. They are now hiding in the low ground within the woods. Over there is one squad under Yu Hongdong hiding on the embankment.'
>
> Cao added: 'After stepping onto the island, you are now the commander of all operations on the island. Do you understand? Any questions?'
>
> Leng: 'No, Sir!'
>
> Cao: 'How long do you need to get prepared?'
>
> Leng: 'Ten minutes, Sir.'
>
> Cao: 'OK. Ten minutes it is. Now go!'

Ten minutes later, Leng and his team landed on Zhenbao Island as promised and headed towards their battle station. As soon as he arrived, he held a brief O Group with Zhang Yinhua (张印华), the commander of 2 Platoon. Yu's men, who had been lying in the snow for the better part of the night, could, in theory, go back to base for a well-earned rest, but despite frozen fingers, being cold and wet, none wanted to leave. Everyone wanted to be part of this battle: something to tell the grandkids about.

After Leng Pengfei left for Zhenbao Island, Cao Jianhua ordered Sun Yuguo and Li Kuan (李宽), the replacement commander for the Reconnaissance Platoon of 398th Regiment, to immediately get onto the island with one squad (No. 3). At about 0800 on 15 March, Sun and Li proceed toward their battle position somewhere on the north-west part of the island. By this time, the sun had been up for at least two hours, and the Soviets could not fail to notice all these Chinese troop movements. Another Chinese trap in the making, clearly a lure to get the Soviets excited. Sure enough, Lieutenant Colonel Yanshin ordered his four-vehicle-strong strike force to move out. One team, led by N. I. Popov, known as Popov's group, and the other under L. Mankovsky, known as Mankovsky's group, took the lead and landed on the island. As the phalanx of metal monsters proceed deep into the island, Leng Pengfei decided to move his tactical HQ forward to get a better view. In doing so, he overexposed himself and invited two aimed shots (luckily, they missed) from two Soviet reconnaissance soldiers from Povpov's group. Leng shot back, firing the opening Chinese shot of the Second Battle of Zhenbao Island. The time was 0802. Closest to the Soviets were men from 2 Platoon, 3rd Company, 1/217th Regiment who immediately fired back. The exposed Soviet border guardsmen were caught in the open and immediately huddled back to their APC for better protection.

Stressed out for so long, everyone was on tenterhooks. Although not permitted to fire, a Chinese soldier from 4 Squad, 397th Regiment's Reconnaissance Platoon, let off a negligent discharge. Although he was given a severe kick by a size nine boot, the damage was done, and this shot alerted the Soviets of the Chinese whereabouts. Yu Hongdong recalled the incident:

> At the beginning of the battle, the Soviets were trying to catch us off guard with a pincer movement. Because of the trees, I could only see a few soldiers. At that time, I was hoping they would

Frontline Man-Power	14096 Man-trips
Civilians	9660 Man-trips
Vehicles	809 Trips
Trucks	2100 Trips
Vehicles Spare Parts	2103 Pieces
Timber	300 Cubic Metres
Concrete	300 Tonnes
Explosive	2 Tonnes
Cooking Oil	1.25 Tonnes
Flour	50 Tonnes
Stables	465 Tonnes
Meat	11.250 Tonnes
Eggs	1750 Kg
Vegetable	22000 Kg
Dry Vegetable	3536 Kg
Daily Necesserties	5300 Sets
Medicine	2 Crates
Cooking Stoves	350 Sets



Although the battle on Zhenbao Island lasted all of two days (2nd and 15 March), the logistic support required by the PLA was enormous. This table in the Zhenbao Island battle memorial hall shows the vast civilian/militia support required. (Courtesy of Zhao Tianzhou (赵天舟)).



This photo shows the four T-62s trying to skirt around to the west side of Zhenbao Island into the inner river, thus blocking the further Chinese reinforcement and logistic supply to troops already on the island. In the lead is Tank No. 545. (PLAP 1969)

> get closer before firing, but suddenly a shot rang out somewhere on my right and immediately alerted the Soviets of our position. I thought, 'Shit,' and ordered the lads to move straight to the secondary position. If I had hesitated, I don't know if I would be talking today, for as the last man left, the Soviet bullets rained down the position we'd just vacated.

At 0830 sharp, the Chinese artillery started pounding the Soviets. First to fire were the 120mm mortars. The mortar line was spread over 100m in width, located in the vicinity of Spot Height 135, some 1km from Zhenbao Island. Almost simultaneously, twelve 82mm mortar tubes from No. 1 Battery, 1/201st, and No. 3 Battery, 3/201st Regiment, began firing. According to Li Yuchang (李玉昌), who was in No. 1 Battery, the firing was so intense that in 15 minutes, the battery let off 300 high explosive rounds onto the Soviets. Caught in the rain of mortar bombs, the Soviet APC tried to escape the barrage and its driver stepped on the gas paddle, heading towards where No. 5 Squad was. Leng Pengfei ordered his RPG team to make ready, and when the BTR-60PB was about 200m away, they let off a salvo, but all missed their mark. The Soviets continued their advance, albeit under heavy fire.



A propaganda artwork by an unknown artist depicting Combat Hero (posthumous) Yang Lin (1944–1969). Yang operates a Type 56-2 75mm RCL gun, an upgraded version of the US M20 RCL gun. (PLAP 1969)

As the Soviets approached closer and closer, Leng Pengfei gave the order to 'fire at will' to all units. While the RPGs and RCLs focused on the APCs, the small arms were directed at the dismounted infantry to segregate the infantry from the APCs. According to one Chinese source, by 0915 Beijing time (Moscow time was 1115 hrs), the Chinese had successfully blunted the first Soviet push into Zhenbao Island by destroying two APCs. However, in another source, Hua Yujie(华玉杰), who claimed to have been the first to destroy a Soviet APC, said it happened at 0930. The following is Hua's account of the event:

> At approximately 0930, three Soviet APCs, in one-up formation, came through the trees towards No. 5 Squad. Their heavy fire kept the lad's heads down. Leng Pengfei ordered the HMG squad (squad commander Shi Yucai (史玉才)) to draw fire on the leading APC. In doing so, the leading APC inevitably was drawn into a trap, for I was waiting. Their flank was exposed as they came close to about 70m – a perfect target. I fired. Boooomed! The round hit home, and I score a direct hit. The whole platoon cheered. 'We hit it; We hit it!' Smoke was billowing from the APC, and survivors came leaping out, but we kept firing. The two remaining APCs came forward to cover the escaping crew members. We scooted as soon as we hit the first APC and took cover in an alternative position waiting for the two APCs. The second APC came to about 50m. I fired my second shot. Baaang! Followed by a flash of light! The APC came to a halt. Some crew members leapt from the top and ran, while others hid on the APC's bottom. The third APC, seeing the disaster in front, turned and retreated. I looked at my watch; the time was 0935!

The Soviet War Diary more or less confirmed this account. It read:

> 1135 hrs [Beijing time 0935] Chinese fire on Damansky Island sporadically using small arms, machine guns, and mortars. According to Colonel G. Sechkin, the Chinese may send in reinforcements and Lieutenant Colonel E.I. Yanshin more ammunition. Our mobile force is engaging the enemy.

> Two APCs had been hit, and one is still burning. Damansky Island is constantly under Chinese fire.

Shortly after the last of the Soviet APCs withdrew from the island, Leng Pengfei picked up the handset and reported back to the Forward HQ on High Ground 209. After the congratulatory messages, the conversation was drawn back to immediate realities. 'We need rapid ammo resupply, especially RPGs; the Soviets will be back,' said Leng. Realising the Soviet retaliation would be severe, the Chinese adjusted their deployment. Two RCL squads from No. 3 Company, 3/201st Regiment, and one RPG squad, currently on Position 3, were on standby, ready to move to Zhenbao Island at a moment's notice.

To the Soviets, the lesson learned, if any, from this first probe onto Zhenbao Island was that this battle could not be won without the Soviet Army. A request for Soviet Army fire support was made even before the last APCs withdrew from the battlefield. Shortly after 0946 hrs, the Soviet artillery began firing. First to fire were the 120mm mortars, followed shortly by Soviet SPG-9 anti-tank teams targeting the likely positions of Chinese anti-tank teams as a precaution before moving the APC forwards. This change of tactics seems to have had the desired effects as the intense fire kept the Chinese RPG teams from rearing their heads, let alone taking up new firing positions. However, the going was still slow, and Colonel Leonov wanted greater Soviet effort by calling for artillery support but without success. If he could not have the guns open up, Leonov turned his hope to the tanks from the 152nd Independent Tank Battalion. For some reason, Leonov decided to lead the tank attack even though he had never had even one day of training as a tank commander. He stopped the first of the four tanks, No. 545, and began hammering on the commander's cupola. Strangely enough, the tank commander was nowhere to be seen, and Leonov took this golden opportunity to promote himself to the commander of the leading tank as well as the commander of the tank platoon.

In retaliation, the Chinese artillery began to target the frozen waterway of the Ussuri River to prevent further Soviet reinforcement, but the tanks took no notice and continued to move forward. The aim of Colonel Leonov was to repeat the 'successful' APC incursion tactics on 2 March and attempt to block the Chinese route to reinforce Zhenbao Island by taking the southern course. While the tanks were advancing toward the Chinese, Soviet MiG-17 jets appeared in the sky over the Ussuri River, followed by a solitary Mi-4 helicopter. While the helicopter hovered, the jets tried to scare the Chinese by making dummy bomb runs. Leng Pengfei laughed aloud: 'The Soviet thinks we are country bumpkin and have never seen a plane before.'

Tank Action, Load!

No matter how one chooses to spin the events, the arrival of the T-62s was potentially a gamechanger. To counter this threat, the Chinese immediately up-gunned their anti-tank defence. Leng Pengfei immediately ordered No. 4 squad from 397th Regiment's Reconnaissance Platoon, under squad commander Shi Rongting (石荣庭), to redeploy its LMG to take on the advancing Soviets. Then, Leng ordered Ding Rongxi (丁荣喜) to take a fire team to cover Position 1's backs to ensure that no Soviets could scoot round from the north of the inner river. Next, Leng ordered No. 3 Squad from 398th Regiment's Reconnaissance Platoon to reinforce Position 1's right flank defence.



Deputy Divisional Commander Huang Chou (黄丑) is seen here in a PR photo demonstrating how to use a satchel charge. The reliance on satchel charges as a primary weapon, especially in AT tank role (a virtual suicide mission), is a testament to how poorly equipped the Chinese PLA was even in the late 1960s. (PLAP 1970)

At 10:10 a.m. Beijing time, after conferring with his superiors, Cao Jianhua ordered his anti-tank assets, No. 3 Company, 3/201st Regiment, 75mm RCLs, and the RPG teams, who were standing by in Position 3 all this time, to be redeployed to Zhenbao Island. Yang Lin (杨林), the squad commander of No. 7 Squad, together with No. 8 Squad, a total of 13 men, then redeployed to the island, leaving No. 9 Squad in reserve on Position 3.

Using the lay of the land as best as they could, dodging the fire as they ran, Yang and his team managed to reach the island without any mishaps. While they were running, Sun Yuguo was waving his arm frantically, shouting instructions, and Yang probably did not hear a word of what Sun was saying. Carrying the RCL on his shoulder and a shell in one hand, Yang managed to reach the inner river of the island. In

front of him was a snow berm, giving him some cover to set up his recoilless gun. But as Yang peered over the snow berm, to his shock, a Russian T-62 was only some 20 metres away. Realising there was no time to set up the RCL, using the height advantage that the snow berm gave, Yang and his teammate, Li Dezhong (李德忠), decided to hurl anti-tank grenades at the approaching tank. Before waiting to see the result, Yang and Li scooted away to Position 1, where they could get some shelter and a better firing position. Unfortunately, none of the grenades hit their mark.



Combat hero (posthumous) Chen Shaoguang (1938–1969). Chen is remembered today as the village where he was born has been renamed Shaoguang Village, and a secondary school in the county, as well as a bridge, have been renamed Shaoguang Secondary School and Hero Bridge (respectively). (PLAP 1970)

Sometime around 10:20 a.m., the Soviet tanks entered into the inner river. Jia Yumin (贾玉民), the LMG No. 2 from 397th Regiment's Reconnaissance Platoon, was the first to spot them. First to fire was the 75mm RCL crewed by Chen Yaguang (陈亚光), the squad commander of No. 6 Squad, and his No. 2 Zhao Wenfu (赵文福). Their first shot hit the left side of the leading tank. Although this did not stop the tank, it certainly startled the crew inside. Whether this shot was the cause, somehow, soon after the tank was hit, Tank No. 545 suddenly turned and headed towards the Chinese minefield. Boom! Boom! Two large explosions erupted, and smoke emerged from the damaged T-62. Its left track broke and slithered off, making it immobile. Seeing the first tank was immobile, the second tank turned and tried to run back to safety but crashed into the third tank, which was still moving forward in a moment of confusion. Seeing the first tank become immobile, other anti-tank teams joined in. Next to fire was an RCL from No. 9 Squad of No. 3 Company, 3/201st Regiment, followed almost immediately by the anti-tank platoon of 1/217th Regiment stationed on High Ground 209.

According to Soviet doctrine of that time, when any tank in formation encountered enemy fire, the entire tank group would turn left or right in an attempt to escape enemy fire while pointing their main gun in the direction of the enemy. However, none of the Soviet tanks followed the prescribed action-on drill on that day. The third tank backtracked some 200m before turning full speed back to the Soviet side of the Ussuri River. The fourth tank tried to get close to the first tank, trying to tow the immobile tank back. However, due to the intense fire now raining on Tank No. 545, no crew member from the fourth tank dared to come out of their tank to connect the tow cable. While the crew of the fourth tank stayed, the crew of the first tank must have lost their nerve and begun to bolt. The first to emerge was 'tank commander' Colonel Leonov, but he fell soon after, killed by a single bullet that penetrated his heart.[1] The other two crewmembers were seen trying to help one injured tank crewman (later confirmed to be Private Aleksey Kuzmin, the tank loader), but after assisting him to run/walk a few steps, they gave up and left him lying in the snow with Leonov.

The failed attack by Colonel Leonov did not stop Lieutenant Colonel Yanshin and his APCs from moving forward despite the heavy Chinese fire. However, the progress was slow, and Colonel Sechkin decided to reinforce the APCs with tank support. Two tanks, Nos. 541 and 458, were chosen from No. 4 Company, 152nd Independent Tank Battalion. Facing them were men from No. 3 Squad, 398th Regiment Reconnaissance Platoon who first spotted the two tanks.

The anti-tank group headed by Yang Lin arrived on the island just in time to counter this new threat. Leng Pengfei immediately directed Li Dezhong to take one 75mm RCL gun and one RPG squad with him to support No. 4 Squad of 397th Regiment Reconnaissance Platoon and Yang Lin to take one RCL gun to support the infantry in the front. Leng ordered Zhang Yinhua to take one fire team and one RPG team to follow and protect Yang. As soon as Yang and his team got into position, right in front of them were one tank and three APCs attempting to thrust into the Chinese lines from the north. The hero of the hour was Yang and under his leadership, the anti-tank force was able to blunt a Soviet attack, but he was to pay the supreme sacrifice. How Yang died was later retold by Leng:

> As soon as Yang reached the new fire position, he and his No. 2, Zhang Changfa (张长发), set up the RCL. By the time the RCL was loaded, the leading Soviet APC was less than 100m away. Swoosh, bang! the HEAT [high explosive anti-tank] round hit the target, and smoke immediately began to emerge. Men began pouring out of the doomed vehicle. Hua Yujie (华玉杰), RPG No. 1, took up his assault rifle and shot at the escaping crew. The remaining Soviet APCs directed all their effort at Yang to cover the escaping infantrymen. Rifleman Du Gang (杜刚) was seriously injured and had to be CASEVACed out. Yang and Zhang fire two more rounds, hitting a second APC. Knowing their position was now totally exposed, Yang and Zhang picked up the RCL and move to an alternative firing position. As they moved, the Soviet infantrymen fired back…Taking shelter behind a big tree, Yang and Zhang were hunkering down when Zhang noticed a Soviet tank and one APC was coming from his right. Just in the nick of time, the new batch of ammo arrived. With the new ammunition

loaded, the last remaining APC was also hit. Although Yang tried to load another round into his gun, his action was much slower because Yang was already bleeding from various wounds by this time. Critically Yang's RCL position was totally exposed from the snow cloud blown up by the RCL back-blast. The Soviet took the opportunity to take revenge, and Tank 541 immediately fired its main gun, killing Yang. Zhang, Yang's No. 2, was severely injured.

Aside from Yang, there was another hero that morning. He was Li Dezhong, the commander of No. 8 Squad. Leng continued:

Li was collocated with No. 4 Squad, Reconnaissance Platoon, 397th Regiment when the Soviet attack came. To ensure he got a good firing solution, he crawled forward some 50m. Together with Sui Mingliang (隋明良), RCL team No. 2, Li had his RCL set up and Piao Daokui (朴道奎), the gun No. 3, soon had the RCL loaded. Two rounds soon left the RCL barrel, and both shots found their target, a T-62 tank (later confirmed to be Tank No. 458).

After two rounds, Li and his team scooted to another firing position. Tank 541 and three APCs were advancing. Li's gun let off three rounds, and all found their mark. The time was 10:40 a.m. (Beijing time). In a short time of 20 minutes, two APCs were totally wrecked, and one was burning. Two tanks, although severely damaged, still managed to return.

For leadership under fire and the defeat of an armoured advance, Yang Lin was awarded the accolade 'Combat Hero' posthumously, and No. 7 Squad, where Yang was the squad commander, was awarded a unit citation of 'Combat Honour, First Class.'

Soon after, at about noontime, Leng was shot. Leng described how he was injured:

I was directing the battle; Zhang Yinhua, the Platoon Commander of 2 Platoon, came forward to confer with him about moving the LMG to a new position on the flank. Soon after he left, suddenly I felt a big blow on my left arm. It was like being hit by a hammer. No feeling at first; I just felt numb. My signaller Wang Yuhai (王玉海) shouted: 'Boss, Get Down!' He came forward to help me support my shattered arm with two pieces of wood. Despite my plea, Cao Jianhua ordered me to get medical attention and replaced me with Sun Yuguo.

At about 12:30 p.m., the Soviets completed their withdrawal from the island, bar a few stragglers taking shelter behind the wrecked APCs. Sun Yuguo took advantage of the lull to take stock of the situation. No. 3 Company's 2 Platoon had two killed and three wounded. Ammunition-wise, the whole platoon needed urgent replenishment, especially RPG rounds. The situation was similar across the entire force on Zhenbao Island. Casualties were light; the urgent need was ammunition and some hot food. Zhang Xiping (张希平) was a member of the replenishment team who came forward with supplies and carried away the wounded. The following was his recollection:

The mission given to us was straightforward. Get ammunition to the island and carry off the wounded. I was given a box of RPG rounds. Each box had six rounds, weighing some 20kg. Each person was allocated one box. In normal circumstances, it was an easy job; the load was not that heavy, and the distance to the island was not far. However, the snow was deep that day, and the steep slope made it a hell of a trip. We had to break the journey into squads, carry and rest, carry and rest. Halfway into the journey, someone shouted; he peed in his pants. We almost all died laughing. Near the drop-off point was a steep slope; I lost my footing, and the box of RPG rounds came off my shoulder and rolled down the slope. My heart nearly popped out of my chest! I thought to myself; I will die! I braced for the explosion, but it never came. Later I found out that the bombs had to be fused before they became dangerous. I picked up the box, and as I got to the drop-off point, a man shouted: 'Oi, You! Get down!' I hunched down, and almost immediately, bullets whistled above my head. It was close! As I lay on the snow, I noticed that the trees around the place were torn to shreds.



Company Commander Li Zhiping (李志平) is seen here teaching winter shooting skills. The rifleman is here holding a Chinese version of the SKS semi-automatic rifle, better known as the Type 56 semi-automatic rifle. Note that the rifle has a blade bayonet instead of the more common spike bayonet (the Chinese-made SKS with serial number below 9000000 has a blade bayonet, and any rifle with serial number above that of 9000000 turned to a spike bayonet). (PLAP 1970)

Third Time Lucky – Soviet Third Wave

Xiao Quanfu, the overall commander of the Zhenbao Island battle, knew that even before the Soviets had withdrawn from the failed second attack, a third attack would come. He immediately ordered reinforcements to the island:

- 2/201st Regiment of 67th Division to be on standby on a nameless hill, be ready to move at a moment's notice.
- Reconnaissance Companies from 46 Corps and 64 Corps to be on standby.
- Two reinforced platoons from 1/217th Regiment (2 Platoon was at reduced strength, less No. 5 Squad) to strengthen troops already at Positions 1 and 2 (Position 2 was occupied by 201st Regiment's 2 AT platoon.)
- Three 75mm RCL guns from No. 1 Company, 201st Regiment, moved into Position 3 to strengthen troops (No. 9 RPG Squad, No. 3 Company, 3/201st Regiment) already there.
- Two 85mm guns from 2/413th Regiment move forward to an area north-west of High Ground 209.
- AT company, with its RCL from 16 Corps, moved from Hutou to Wulindong.

3 Platoon, No. 1 Company, 217th Regiment, under the leadership of Platoon Commander Zhu Boxi (朱柏熙) to support No. 3 Company, 2 Platoon on the island.

With these extra troops, less those who were destroyed in the previous fighting, the total force on the island was now at:

- Five infantry squads (No. 7, 8, 9 Squad, 3 Platoon, No. 1 Company, 1/217th Regiment; and two machine gun squads, No. 4 and 5, 2 Platoon, No. 3 Company from the same regiment acting as infantry)
- Two squads of reconnaissance troops (No. 4 Squad, 397th Regiment Reconnaissance Platoon, No. 3 Squad, 398th Regiment Reconnaissance Platoon)
- Two machine gun squads (No. 4 & 5 Squad, 2 Platoon, No. 3 Company, and 3 Platoon, No. 1 Company, both from 1/217th Regiment)
- Three RPG teams (from 3/201st and 1/217th Regiment)
- One 75mm RCL gun (No. 8 Squad, No. 3 Company, 3/201st Regiment)

Sure enough, a little after 1:30 p.m. (Beijing time), the Soviets began to shell the Chinese positions on the mainland. A Mi-4 helicopter was seen hovering, most likely carrying the Soviet forward observer. In this first bombardment phase, the Chinese estimated that the Soviets shot over 300 rounds covering a front just under 10km wide and 7km deep. As most of the Chinese positions were well camouflaged, most of the barrage missed its mark, except the 82mm mortars from No. 3 Battery, 3/201st Regiment. Dong Huaisheng (董怀生), the veteran battery commander, immediately saw the signs as some shells began raining ominously close to his gun line. He shouted: 'We are being bracketed! Battery move now!' The mortars were well bedded-in and digging them out was a tough job. Anyhow, the mortars did manage to get out before the Soviets managed to find the mark. Quick thinking by Dong Huaisheng saved 80 lives from almost certain death.

The 85mm gun from the 2/413th Regiment did not manage to get into its new position until 2:50 p.m. and had to make the move under fire. Luckily, the distance they needed to move the guns was only just over 40m, and the Chinese gunners did not have to be exposed in the open for too long, even though it had to be completed by hand.

Massive bombardment was usually the sign of an impending attack, you did not need to be a professor to know that. Sure enough, as the barrage continued, the Soviets were busy preparing for another attack. This attack was to be spearheaded by five tanks, 18 APCs, some 150 men (a depleted MR battalion) from the Army,



Combat Hero (posthumous) Sun Zhengmin (1936–1969), the mine expert, was mortally wounded by a Soviet sniper; after being shot, Sun accidentally triggered a mine that ultimately killed him. (PLAP 1970)

and another two APCs and 30 men from the Border Force. H-hour was set at 1510 hrs (Beijing time), with 10 minutes of preparation barrage provided by BM-21s from 13th Independent MBRL Battalion to soften up the Chinese. This was the first time that the BM-21s were to go into action. According to Soviet discourse, the MBRL killed more than a thousand Chinese, and the CIA concurred with the devastation caused, saying the Soviets turned part of China into a moon-like environment on account of the number of craters seen from their spy satellites. However, the Chinese casualties were relatively light; most of the rockets landed in the centre of the Chinese position, where there were fewer troops. Most of the positions were, in fact, scattered at the ends, like a dumbbell, heavy at the ends, light in the centre.

At 1513 Beijing time, the Soviets started their third offense to retake Zhenbao Island. Leading the attack were 120 soldiers taken from No. 4 and 5 companies, 2/199th MR Regiment, 80 guardsmen from the 57th Imansky Border Guard force, and five T-62 tanks backed up by 12 BTR-60PB APCs. Learning from the errors of the two previous attacks, the Soviets avoided a direct approach to taking the island and split the assault into two parts once the main force landed. One prong of the attack would aim at the eastern shores of Zhenbao Island using the small brook that ran longitudinally down the north–south axis of the island. This would serve as the boundary between the eastern and western forces. The other prong of the attack aimed toward the island's west shore. By doing so, this western force would form a barrier to prevent any further Chinese reinforcement from the mainland. Lieutenant Colonel Alexsandr Konstantinov was in command of the eastern force with mobile force border guards and men from No. 4 Company, 2/199th MR Regiment in six APCs, while the western force consisted of a mixed force from No. 5 Company, 2/199th MR Regiment, and border guards and six APCs, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Aleksandr Smirnov. Smirnov's force was supported by three tanks, while the remaining two accompanied Konstantinov's group. As the Soviets approached the Chinese, they changed from a single file formation and fanned out into a classic extended line formation, ready to assault, moving forward cautiously by fire and manoeuvre. Facing Smirnov were men from No. 2 and 3 platoons, 1/217th Regiment. About 15 minutes after the Soviets launched the third wave of their attack,



Chinese Type 56 (copies of the Soviet D-44) 85mm anti-tank guns were the primary anti-tank weapon for the Chinese on 15 March 1969. Although these guns made several hits on the T-62, none of the Chinese AT rounds managed to penetrate the armour. This propelled the Chinese to examine their AT capability urgently. The Type 56 85mm AT gun was replaced by the upgraded Type 73 100mm anti-tank gun, using China's first generation of tungsten core fin stabilised discarding sabot penetrators. (PLAP 1970)

the Chinese artillery struck back. Soon the whole of Zhenbao Island became a furnace, as Hades had just opened its door.

Cao Jianhua realised that, like before, the key to victory was to destroy the Soviet armour. He immediately ordered the anti-tank team of No. 1 Company, 1/201st Regiment, to go onto the island with their 75mm RCL guns. Under the leadership of Platoon Commander Tang Ruda (汤汝达), his AT platoon moved from No. 3 Position and attempted to cross the inner river and land on the west side of the island. However, the heavy Soviet fire successfully interdicted two squads. Only one squad managed to land on the island and position itself on the northern part, ready to take on the Soviets. At 1540, Tang's squad managed to sight its first tank. It was part of Lieutenant Colonel Alexsandr Konstantinov's force, and it was only 20m away. Too near to fire his RCL gun, Tang drew his pistol, and the rest of the AT team used their assault rifles. According to Li Yuchang, a squad commander from the artillery survey team from No. 1/1 Battalion recalled that they successfully killed four infantrymen. Li continued:

> Tang ordered Li Fengxiang (李凤祥), one of his AT gunners, to use their AT grenades. Li stood up and tried to lob his grenade, but he was shot in the head before he could. Blood gushed out like a fountain. Tang leapt forward, picked up the grenade with the safety pin out, and lobbed the grenade towards the tank. Unfortunately, Tang was also hit as he lobbed the grenade. He died instantly. Tang was only 29 at the time of his death. The heavy Soviet fire wiped out the entire platoon from No. 1 Company, 1/201st, killing Tang, Li as well as Yuan Qifa (袁启发) and Zhu Chaoyu (朱朝玉).

Zhang Yinhua, the Platoon Commander of 2 Platoon, kept his cool and ordered his platoon to fire only when the Soviet tanks were at almost point-blank range. When the Soviets reached about 50m, the Chinese let loose all their AT weapons. Suddenly, the Soviets lost their momentum and paused. Anti-tank gunner Hua Yujie suddenly found himself facing an APC, only some 15–20m away. It was too good to miss, and Hua used his RPG to maximum effect, though it was too close, and the blast knocked Hua unconscious. When he came to, Hua was temporarily deaf. He had let off more than 10 RPG rounds in a very short space of time. Cao Dianguo (曹殿国), Squad Commander of No. 4 Squad, continued the story:

> I tapped Hua on his back, for he was deaf and could not hear anything. Despite being injured, Hua was high on adrenaline and could not stop. I pointed out to him his next target. An APC some 70m away. The APC saw Hua creeping up on it and let its machine gun do the talking. Hua managed to move just in the nick of time. Finding a new firing position, he let off two rounds from his RPG in quick succession, destroying the APC. This was Hua's four kills, instantly making Hua an Ace tank killer.

Another hero of that day was Xiao Zhuxiang (肖祝祥), a squad commander from 3 Platoon, No. 1 Company, 1/217th Regiment. Xiao's first kill was an APC trying to cross the berm. As it rode

over the berm exposing the underbelly, Xiao's RPG found the most vulnerable part of the APC. It immediately burst into flames. Soon after, Xiao's RPG also scored a hit on the two following APCs. With three APCs destroyed, the Soviet infantrymen panicked. Without steadfast leadership, the Soviets did not effectively direct their fire, giving the Chinese from 8 Squad almost a field day, a turkey shoot that nearly wiped out the entire infantry force. While 8 Squad was engaging the Soviet infantry, Xiao's team scored another hit on the APC. A third tank killer of Zhenbao Island was Du Yongchun (杜永春), the political officer from 133rd Division now attached to No. 4 Squad. He fired off 11 RPG rounds that afternoon; scoring hits on three APCs.

Amid the firefight, Sun Yuguo's field telephone suddenly rang. Sun picked it up. It was Zhang Yinhua. Sun continued:

> Zhang was screaming his head off. I could not make sense of a word he said. I said: 'Calm down, son, calm down. Take a deep breath and speak slowly'. Zhang said: 'Ammo is low, Boss. We need immediate replenishment.' I directed my signaller to call the HQ at High Ground 209, but there was no answer. The lines were down, probably cut by the Soviet artillery.

Holding the line on No. 3 Position was No. 9 Squad from No. 3 Company, 3/201st Regiment. The Soviet barrage killed squad 2iC Wu Wenjun (吴文俊), seriously wounding Ma Shaomin (马少民) and had to be evacuated by his buddy Wang Xiuyu (王秀玉) leaving just Zheng Yujiang (郑玉江) and Zhao Shaokui(赵绍奎) manning a single RCL gun. The two men fired 13 times, successfully blunting the Soviet attack.

The battle was certainly not going well for the Soviets. By 1550 (Beijing time), just 50 minutes into the ground offensive, the Soviets had lost six APCs, one tank with the remaining six APCs in various degrees of damage. This left only four tanks in operational order. In this far north, especially in the winter, the daylight hours were short, and soon visibility was being lost on the battlefield. The temperature plummeted with the heat of the sun's rays waning. Forced to abandon their APCs, many of the Soviet soldiers who chose to discard their thick winter leather coats due to the cramped space aboard the APCs were now beginning to feel sorry as the biting cold Siberian air took hold. The battle was all but over by 1710 (Beijing time), bar sporadic gunshots. The Soviets lost two tanks and seven APCs, with another four seriously damaged and one slightly damaged.

The Gunners' Battle

In the third wave of the attack, both sides deployed their artillery to maximise the damage caused. The Soviets unleashed their MBRLs, firing in anger for the first time. However, both sides were at first hesitant to enlarge the battlefield, with the potential to snowball into devastating consequences. According to Chen Xilian, then the commander of Shenyang Military Region, he sought permission to unleash the heavy guns from Prime Minister Zhou Enlai himself. Some commentators later remarked that during the second attack on 15 March, the delay in deploying artillery to support the armour attack was a primary reason why it failed. Permission to open fire on the Chinese mainland apparently had to go all the way up to Breshnev himself in the Kremlin, and the time difference between Far Eastern Russia and Moscow meant that when permission was needed, the key decision-makers were all asleep.

According to Lin Lu (林路), a gunner from 2nd Battalion, 413th Regiment, it was one of the most unforgettable days in his life:

> On that morning, I must have loaded some 110 rounds into my gun. By the time I was loading my 20th round, I was so hot that I had to take off my padded winter jacket and ushanka hat despite the sub-zero temperature. Sometime later, someone picked up my hat and placed it back on my head. I shouted: 'Get off, can't you see I am sweating?' I was indeed sweating like a pig, just like I came out of a shower. I brushed the ushanka hat off, and he walked away. Later back in the barracks, I learned that he was the deputy commander of 23 Corps, Sun Yunhan (孙云汉). I thought, 'I am for the high jump now!' But nothing happened. An hour later, I discovered I was bleeding from my right ear. My eardrum must have been broken. From then onwards, the roar of the gun was not as loud. Later I remember the gun No. 2 was carried off by the medic, and Zhang Tianxi (张天锡), usually the gun No. 1, took over. By the end of the day, I was so tired that I could barely stand up.

At 1535 Beijing time, the Zhenbao Battlefront HQ ordered No. 4 and 6 Troops, No. 5 Battery, 2/413th Artillery Regiment, to engage the attacking Soviet armour. No. 6 Troop commander Yuan Hechang (袁和常) ordered this gun to aim at the APC approaching the south-west of Zhenbao Island, and so did No. 4 Troop. In a flash, the leading Soviet APC erupted into flames. As soon as the first APC burst into flame, Yuan ordered the gun to target the next APC, following just behind. Due to the trees, it took a third shot before scoring a hit. Seeing No. 6 Troop scoring a second hit, Deng Zhixue (邓治学), the commander of No. 4 Troop, ordered his gun to the third APC. The first shot missed altogether, but the second round hit the back of the APC. Once immobile, the APC was as good as dead. Four shots in quick succession meant the APC was now genuinely finished. Soon both guns scored another hit on another APC, but now with three APCs in flames and billowing smoke, the battle picture became obscured. Loader Wang Shunqiao (王顺乔) from No. 6 Troop broke two fingers; holding back the pain, he continued loading, shielding his hand in a thick winter glove to minimise the pain. Even during the most intense phase of the battle, the ammo supply continued without abate. Yuan continued with the story:

> After destroying the APC, I ordered the AT gun to switch to the tanks. Despite shouting twice at the top of my voice, gun No. 2 Li Dahua (李大华) remained motionless. I dashed up and tapped him on his shoulder; I saw his face's left side was red. His eardrum must have burst. I directed the gun and let off six rounds; three hit the target. Amidst the tank battle, an APC shot out from behind, right into the crosshair of our guns. Five shots went out, two hit the target.

Deng Zhixue:

> Lack of hearing protection was a common problem during that era. I shouted my orders, but my No. 2 did not move. The battery 2iC Zhao Ziming (赵子明), shot forward, pushed the deaf No. 2, and aimed three shots at the target. The third round hit the tank track, immobilising it.

According to the post-battle report, the sixteen 85mm guns fired over 1,200 rounds that afternoon.

Pause for Now

With the battlefield now quiet, at 1718 hrs, Sun Yuguo ordered a withdrawal across the inner river to Position 2, and the standby

force, 1/201st Regiment, 67th Division, was called forward to take over Position 1 and relieve the troops who had been fighting non-stop for most of the day. No. 1 Company was tasked with the job and split into three, each platoon taking over one of the three positions, No. 1 on the island and Nos. 2 and 3 on the mainland. Two MG platoons and one AT platoon with 75mm RCL took over positions vacated in Positions 2 and 3. The soldiers from the Reconnaissance Platoon, who had been at the forefront of the battle, were just walking zombies as they dragged their tired bodies back to the mainland. Du Yongchun recalled:

> The lads were so tired that some fell asleep standing up using the tree as support. When we did get back to Point 209, the officers from the forward HQ came out to greet us. One held my hand and said: 'Glad you are all OK; I was so worried about you. Could not get you on the landline.' I looked at him, dazed. After a long pause, which seems like five minutes, I opened my mouth: 'Still alive, still alive.' Later, a truck took us back to base, back to a roaring fire. The lads there help us de-kit and massage our legs and tired shoulders. We had some hot drinks, but before I could finish, I fell asleep. All I could remember was I really needed a good night's sleep.

That evening, Huang Hao (黄浩), the divisional commander of 67th Division, was surveying the battlefield with Cao Jianhua. Although dead tired, Cao was asked to stay back to support Huang as he had first-hand experience fighting the Soviets. They came across the wrecked Tank No. 545. They climbed on the tank and discovered it still had 37 rounds left for its main gun. At that time, neither knew the importance of the tank. The first reaction was to blow it up to prevent the Soviets from recovering the tank. Cao suggested to Huang that they keep the tank as evidence of Soviet aggression. Huang was thinking just that, but later that evening Lin Biao, the Defence Minister, ordered that they keep the tank for research. To prevent the Soviets from recovering the tank, Sun Zhengmin, the deputy chief clerk of the 2nd Military Industrial Zone of Shenyang Military Region, led a detachment to block the access of the southern tip of Zhenbao Island through Soviet encroachment by laying some mines across the frozen river. That evening Sun climbed on the tank and recovered the gun stabiliser for research. Chen Yan (陈雁) and two soldiers blew up the left track with a satchel charge to prevent the tank from being towed away.

That evening, Mao, Zhou, and senior members of the Chinese leadership received the report of developments at Zhenbao Island. Zhou ordered that the Soviets be given breathing space, to not fire unless fired upon, and give time for the Soviets to recover the dead. Mao warned of Soviet treachery but concluded the meeting by saying it was 'best to stop fighting.'

On the morning of the 16th, the Chinese sentries on High Ground 209 and 358 reported the Soviets were trying to recover the damaged tanks and APCs, along with their dead. At the same time, a Soviet helicopter was hovering over the battle area. However, the sentries reported that many Soviet soldiers seemed to be not involved in the above tasks but were milling around the wooded area. To the Chinese, these Soviets were up to nothing good, and the general consensus was that they must be laying mines. To prevent the Chinese from recovering the destroyed T-62 tank, the Soviets laid mines around the tank leaving a narrow channel to tow the tank away.

Artillery Duel – 17 March 1969

At 1540 hrs (Beijing time), the day's peace was suddenly broken by a Soviet artillery bombardment on the Chinese side of the Ussuri River. Soviet MBRLs rained down on High Ground 209 and 135, while the two battalions of guns from 378th Regiment focused their bombardment on Positions 2 and 3 by the Ussuri riverbank. As soon as the MBRLs ceased, 1/607th Regiment's eighteen M-46 130mm guns took over and continued where the MBRLs left off. According to the Chinese, these 130mm guns fired 180 rounds in rapid succession before stopping to move to their alternative position.

One of the often-made claims by the Soviets about the 1969 border clash was that the Soviets destroyed two Chinese ISU-122 assault guns. According to Soviet discourse, the heroes of the day were the D-1 152mm howitzers from the Soviet Army's 3/378th Artillery Regiment. However, never in any Chinese archives related to the Zhenbao Island battle were there any mentions of tanks or assault guns deployed in the Chinese Order of Battle. The only logical deduction as to why the Soviets made such claims must be poor armoured fighting vehicle recognition training, which mistook some destroyed Chinese equipment, probably an artillery piece, for a tank.

The Chinese had to respond to such provocation, and at 4 p.m. sharp, the Chinese gunners with the eighteen 85mm guns from the PLA's 2/413th Regiment, made their reply. The following is the recollection of gunner Lin Lu (林路):

> On the afternoon of the 17th, the Soviets obviously had not learned their lesson and massed their tanks and infantry again for another assault. Our infantry took care of their infantry, and our AT guns took on their tanks. As soon as their tanks were hit, they turned and retreated back to their side of the river. Without tank support, their infantry panic. Later the Soviet artillery bombed us. Sure, some of our lads died; it was inevitable. Their rocket artillery gave us a real pounding; it exploded only after digging into the ice. If the blast did not kill you, you got buried and died suffocated. The artillery battle on the 17th was not as bad as the battle on the 15th. Our battery commander gave us each a turn to aim the gun after a target change. I fired eight rounds, but for most of the day, I was the loader. According to the OC, our battalion fired 1,900 rounds that day, spreading over 18 guns, just over 100 rounds per barrel. Due to the intense heat, some of the gun barrels tuned to a silvery green colour, something I'd never seen before.

Like before, the bulk of the responsibility for blunting this new round of Soviet attacks fell to the RCL gunners. By this time, the Soviets knew where these AT guns were, and their artillery barrage was aimed to remove this threat before launching the attack. To avoid being turned into mincemeat, the RCL crews had to move to new locations constantly. It was a game of cat and mouse. But despite taking every precaution, inevitably, there were casualties. No. 3 Battery of 3/201st Regiment lost one of its 82mm mortars and sustained many casualties. Zhang Zhao (张昭) was one of those injured. Zhang said:

> Our squad 2iC Geng Jieshi (耿结实) lost his front teeth and much of his nose. Part of his tongue was also severed. After sending Geng off to the regimental aid post, I had a moment to take a breather and sat down. I suddenly felt a stinging pain on my backside as I sat down, something I did not notice before. I dropped my trousers and found that my backside was bleeding.

A small shell fragment lodged in my bottom; most of my padded winter trousers were covered in blood.

Dong Huaisheng, the OC of No. 3 Battery, 3/201st Regiment, knew that the Soviets had the battery in range, and if they did not move now, there would be no battery left to move. In the first salvo, almost all his battery was either dead or injured, some seriously. Dong shouted at the top of his voice: 'Move Now!' As soon as the last man left the gun line, the Soviets' bombs landed. Zhao Shitou (赵石头), the squad leader of No. 2 Squad, being one of the last to move, was caught by the barrage and died.

In the two days of battle, No. 3 Battery, 3/201st Regiment was one of the units that suffered the most casualties. In order to maintain operational effectiveness, the regimental commander had to reinforce No. 3 battery with troops. Each battalion had to send 15 soldiers to No. 3 Battery.

7
BATTLE FOR THE T-62

Mines!

Initially, the Chinese did not realise the importance of Tank No. 545. Luo Xianlu (罗先陆), the OC of 201st Regiment's Special Duties Company, even managed to retrieve an operators' manual from the inside of the tank when instructed to set up a listening post and sentries position on the inner river channel. He climbed the tank purely out of curiosity, not having seen a Russian tank in such proximity. Unable to read any Russian, he kept the booklet as a souvenir until he showed it to a friend who told him this was vitally important and must be handed in to higher authorities. In the mid-1960s, most of the PLA were ignorant of any weapons development program, and the tank development program was no exception. All weapon development programs were deemed highly secret, and few outside this close circle knew anything about anything to do with new weapons. Since the Type 59 tank had become the nation's main battle tank (MBT), the Chinese had been working on upgrades. The Type 59 was essentially a Soviet T-54A, but it lacked a stabiliser and night-fighting capabilities. Getting a virtually undamaged T-62 was a godsend, for it had both a stabiliser and infrared night-fighting capability. But this technological prize nearly did not make it back to the boffins, for some ignorant commander even ordered that the tank be blown up as the barrel stuck up too high and ordered Luo to blow up the barrel. Unfortunately, Liu Yinliang (刘银亮), the squad commander called by Luo to do the job, chose to stick a Bangalore torpedo into the barrel, thinking it would blow up the barrel, but the explosive failed to make a mark on it, thus saving the tank.

On the evening of the 17th, company commander Ren Xianglin (任祥林) personally took over No. 1 Platoon, No. 1 Company, 201st



T-62 No. 545 after it had been immobilised by the mine and stripped of its key equipment, such as gunnery sights and radio. (PLAP 1969.)

Regiment, to set up a security line to protect the damaged T-62. If the Chinese did not know the importance of the tank, the Soviets surely knew that they needed to recover the tank; they too were sending a party trying to retrieve it, or at least damage it beyond recovery. The Soviet plan was to use three T-55s from the 2/61st Tank Regiment to destroy the tank, and a foot party to grab a POW for interrogation.



Tank No. 545 after being recovered from the river. Here the Chinese are organising a celebration and award ceremony. Note the damage on both the left and right tracks, road wheels, and the barrel. (PLAP 1969)

The Chinese party proceeded in a single file formation. Suddenly, a blast broke the silence, followed by a deadly scream of pain and shock. The lead scout had stepped on a mine. Blam! Another explosion! Another man stepped on a mine. Ren thought they were being attacked. We walked into an ambush! Ren shouted at the top of his voice: 'Ambushed right!' and immediately led the rest of the platoon on a well-practiced anti-ambush drill. As he led the charge, Ren himself stepped on a mine. Boom! Ren rolled down in agony. In the brief five minutes or so, nearly all in the squad were injured one way or another, squad 2iC Tang Zhengzhi (唐正志) and Rifleman Tan Zuwan (谭祖万) died. The mine blast alerted the Soviets, and in haste, the T-55s missed their target. The Soviets realised that the Chinese were still on the island and ordered a total withdrawal, fearing they would again walk into another Chinese trap. Now the Soviets were finally clear about the intention of the Chinese; they also wanted Tank No. 545. If the Soviets could not get the tank, the Chinese must not have it either. To destroy the T-62, the Soviets deployed their heavyweight weapons – two M-240 240mm calibre mortars.

The morning of the 18th saw the whole of Zhenbao Island covered in a blanket of fresh snow. Shortly after 9am, Sun Zhengmin (孙征民), deputy chief clerk of the 2nd Military Industrial Zone of Shenyang Military Region, and Gao Hengbin (高恒斌), a combat engineer advisor, were both summoned to the HQ. Sun was ordered to lead two parties, one to de-fuse the Russian mines and another to lay more mines to fill in any vulnerable gaps. The orders Sun received were specific. The operation was to be planned by Gao Hengbin; Sun was to be the leader on the ground, and the troops assigned to this job were a platoon from the Special Duties Company, 201st Regiment. Sun organised ad-hoc training on Soviet mines to prepare for the task. Military training was often put on the backburner favouring political education for much of the Cultural Revolution, so many of the boys in the special duties company had not seen a Chinese mine, let alone a Soviet one. After almost half a day of preparation and sorting out administration matters, at 1630 Sun led the patrol off towards Zhenbao Island. The team was split into three groups, Sun leading one team, Wan Zhongkui (万仲奎) leading one team, and Chen Yan (陈雁) leading the last team with Gao Hengbin attached. Each team had a mine detector and a few mine probes. When Sun reached some 100m into the island, he spotted the first of the new Soviet mines – the POMZ-2, a stake-mounted anti-personnel fragmentation mine. This type of mine required a tripwire and were best hidden in bushy areas amongst tall grass. Some mines were strung together in a daisy chain to cause multiple explosions and greater casualties. Sun had never seen a POMZ mine before, and it took him quite a while to figure out how to disarm it. In one hour, Sun and his men took out 39 POMZ mines. Careless disposal of wrapping paper and boxes by the Soviet minelayers gave Sun a tale-tail sign of the approximate dimensions of the minefield. By 9 p.m., Sun returned to base with samples of this new mine for engineers to mull over. While Sun was demining, the Soviet 240mm mortars pounded the disabled T-62 tank, but none hit the tank.

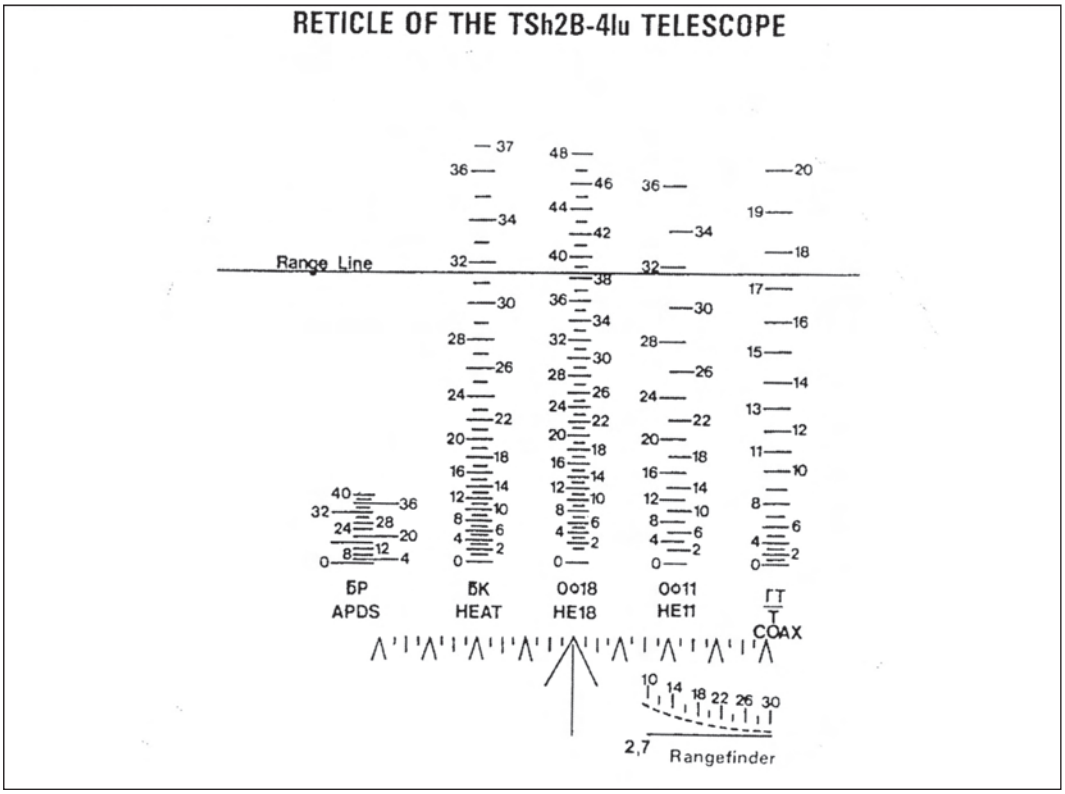
It was not until the 19th that the Chinese realised the importance of the disabled Soviet tank.

The battle with the Soviets attracted many to the front line; among them were Shi Baoyuan (石宝源) and Wang Pushan (王璞善), both armour experts from the Shenyang Military Region. After gaining access to the tank and conferring with other experts, they were delighted to confirm that this was the latest in Soviet MBTs, a T-62 tank. The news soon spread, and when Xiao Quanfu, the overall commander of the Zhenbao Island battle, heard about it, he immediately ordered Shi to dismantle the gun sights and the radio onboard and dispatch them to Beijing ASAP. Xiao also instructed that the tank be surrounded with barbed wire and a 24-hour guard to be mounted.

In order to prepare to have the tank moved back for tank boffins to have a closer look, a path needed to be cleared, and Sun Zhenmin was again ordered to do the demining work. To ensure Sun could do this without any interference from the Soviets, Sun was to be protected by a squad from the 201st Special Duties Company with Xu Maosheng (徐茂盛), an officer, placed in charge. This time Sun discovered another new mine, a PMN anti-personnel mine. The PMN mine was mainly made of plastic and thus not easily detected using a conventional mine detector. Later on, Sun also discovered another rarely seen trip flare, the SM-320. Like the POMZ, the SM-320 was also triggered with a tripwire. However, Sun's luck was soon to run out. On the morning of the 20th, Sun once again entered Zhenbao with a team of de-miners. Although Zhenbao Island was clouded with mist, the Soviets were still on high alert on this fateful morning. Their DShK 14.5mm heavy machine guns would bark at



One of the two vital pieces of equipment removed from Tank No. 545. The Tsh2B-41 gunner's day sight with 3.5x magnification, 18-degree field of view or 7x magnification and eight-degree field of view. (PLAP 1969)



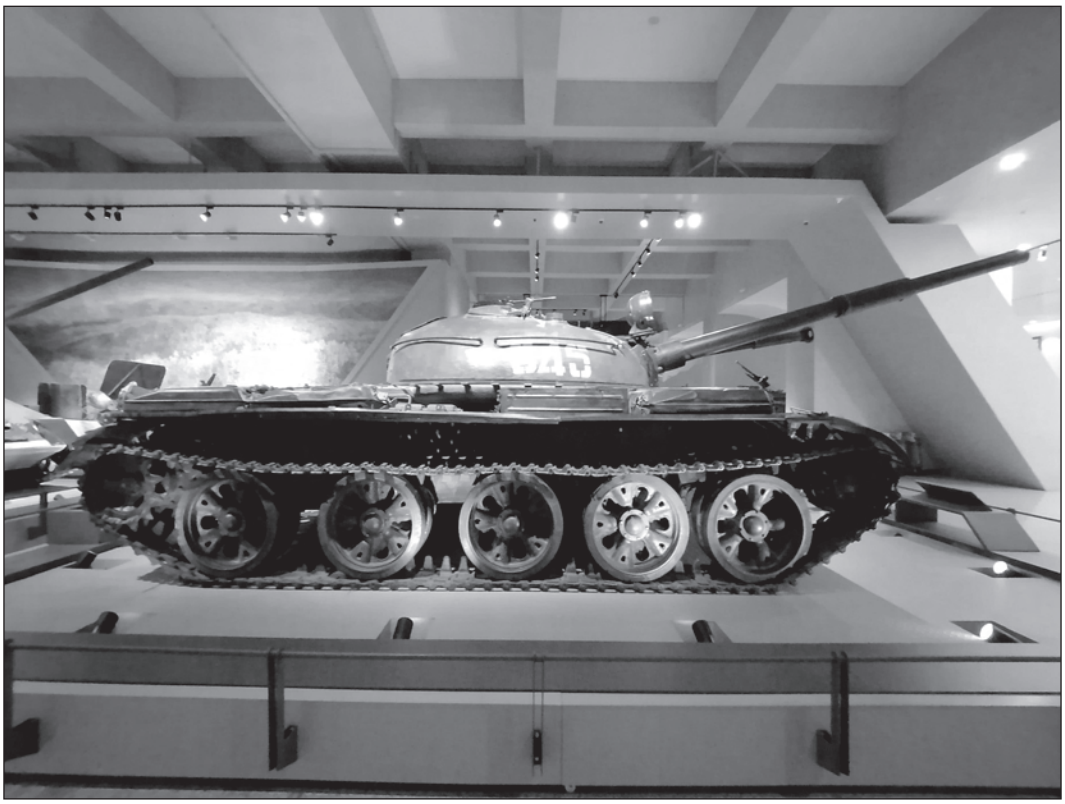
Sight picture of the Tsh2B-41 sight. A range knob on the bottom of the sight introduces the superelevation required for the ammunition specified by the tank commander. The gunner's stadiametric rangefinder is at the bottom right of the reticle. (This image from a US Army training document includes annotations in English.) (US Army TRADOC Bulletin 10, February 1979)

any sign of Chinese movement, spuing deadly red-hot lead toward their targets. Maybe because of the stress this intermitting fire placed on Sun's men, whose nerves were already on tenterhooks, they took a wrong step and hit a mine, and three men were injured. Maybe because of his experience, Sun took it upon himself to deal with those mines under challenging conditions, but as he was working on a mine, whether by luck or due to an eagle-eyed shooter, Sun was caught by a burst of 14.5mm fire and died soon after reaching the regimental aid post.

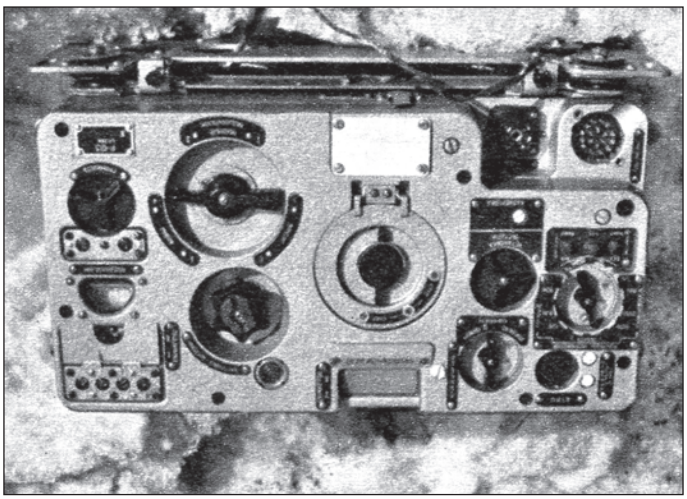
Despite the death of Sun Zhenmin, the de-miners continued to work and successfully made safe 1,700 Soviet mines and, in return, laid over 20 anti-tank mines to guard against any further encroachment of Soviet tanks or APCs.

Recovering Tank No. 545

On 21 March, the order to recover the T-62 was officially dispatched to Xiao Quanfu, and immediately, he ordered Wang Pushan to board the tank and recover any sensitive items found. With two men in tow, Wang entered the tank and successfully recovered a manual as well as all 37 rounds of 115mm ammunition. Knowing the Soviets may be up to something, the number of guards around the tank increased again. Under the command of Zhuang Fangyun (庄方云), the 2iC of No. 1 Company, 201st Regiment, No. 1 Platoon was assigned to protect the tank. Zhuang placed three men inside the tank; the rest of the platoon hid in the surrounding bushes. The men were tired after days of combat, and the lack of sleep and rest began to take a toll. Critically the sentries nodded off and allowed a team from a Soviet reconnaissance patrol – heading to Zhenbao Island to destroy Tank No. 545 and, if possible, capture a Chinese soldier alive – to approach. The sleeping sentry, Zheng Changfa (郑长发), paid for his mistake by being knocked unconscious with the butt of the rifle, and was then tied up and made ready to be hauled back. At the same time, two men crawled underneath the tank, each carrying a bundle of explosives ready to blow up the tank. The peace of the night was suddenly broken by the rat-tat-tat of a burst of automatic fire just as the two Soviet soldiers were busy underneath Tank No. 545. Who fired and at what? That was the first question everyone asked themselves. To the Chinese, it must be another Soviet attack. The first reaction of the six men from the Soviet reconnaissance patrol must have been: 'Shit, we have been discovered.' The sound of the gunfire shook Zhuang Fangyun, who was just about to nod off. Zheng shouted: 'The Soviets are coming!' Immediately he grabbed



Tank No. 545 as it appeared in 2021. Today this T-62 is exhibited in the basement section of the Military Museum in Beijing. T-62 No. 54 is an early production tank, Soviet designation Obr.1960 (Ob'yekt 166). Note the lack of a commander's OU-3GK searchlight and a missing left white light driving light. (Author B Lai)



A Soviet Magnolia R-123M HF/VHF radio, frequency range 20-51.5Mhz, 25kHz channel spacing, 25 Watts output, requiring 26V DC to operate. The set can transmit over a range of 16 to 55km, depending on the type of antenna, normal for the T-62 was the 4m rod antenna. (PLAP 1969)

what he could; an LMG just happened to be by his side and he sprayed off a burst towards the direction of where he thought the Soviets were. The lads soon joined in with their assault rifles and injured one of the two men underneath the tank in a moment of confusion. The Soviets threw two grenades. With the surprise now totally gone, there was nothing the Soviet patrol could do but cut and run with their prisoner. During the confusion, one of the Soviet patrols must have stepped on a mine, and with four of the six men now injured they had no strength to haul Zheng Changfa all the way back. With hindsight, the Soviets should not have knocked Zheng unconscious, for an unconscious man is a heavy deadweight that needed to be carried, a very heavy load indeed. When the Soviet patrol returned to their side of the river, they tried one last time to destroy the tank with cannon fire. In total, 12 shots were fired, but none hit.

In the morning, the Chinese discovered the two unexploded satchel charges. In their haste, the two men had left the electric detonator unconnected. The thirty-seven 115mm rounds were in a pile not far from the tank. Luckily none of the grenades hit it, or else the tank might have ended up destroyed. In many Russian language articles concerning this episode of the Battle of Zhenbao Island, Russian history buffs often ask why the two Soviet saboteurs did not place their explosives inside the tank. The answer is simple; if they had tried to enter the tank, they would both have been killed, for Zhuang Fangyun had placed three men inside the tank.

After the failed escapade of trying to blow up the tank, the Soviets stopped sending patrols onto Zhenbao Island. But this did not mean they had given up trying to deny the Chinese their prize. Soviet snipers and HMG gunners continued to shoot at anyone approaching the tank. By 1969, the Soviets had night-vision devices, which meant the Chinese could not use darkness as cover and the job of recovering the T-62 was extremely hazardous. The hero of the day was Zhao You (赵友), a company commander of Rao He (饶河), the local militia. In an article entitled *Riding a Horse, Carrying a Gun and Roaming the World*, Zhao You described in his own words what he did:

> To dismantle these vital components, one must at least have some knowledge of machinery and, even better, know something about tanks. Before leaving the army, I was a tank company commander serving in the Beijing area. To gain possession of the tank, we must make haste, for the longer we took, the greater the chance the Soviets could eventually destroy it. So far, they had been unlucky, and their luck may change any time. For reasons best known to the bosses, on that fateful day, there were no tankers within the Zhenbao Island battle area. I VOLUNTEERED when I heard the call for people with knowledge of tanks. A first, they were not too friendly. First, I dressed in civilian clothes, which didn't give them confidence. I might just as well be any old farmer. The officer in the room, a name I have now forgotten, questioned me and checked my credentials. I answered all questions confidently, for I was an old tanker, and despite now not being part of the regular army, I had not forgotten my stuff. The officer asked what I needed to complete the tasks. I asked for one assistant and a comprehensive toolbox. After having a late meal, I set off at 11 p.m. sharp, and the jeep that took me drove without any lights. It was a hair-raising journey despite lasting only 15 minutes. At the setting-off point, the authorities ordered five armed men to protect the technician and me just in case the Soviets tried anything. After some last-

minute administration, we eventually headed towards the tank at 12 midnight.

The T-62 was some 60m from the shoreline; the ice surrounding the tank was peppered with shell holes making the trip rather tricky. When we reached the tank, four armed men stood guard at the four corners while one stood guard on the tank. My assistant was outside the turret handing me tools as I called out. I was alone inside the tank.

I had to work fast to escape detection. The longer we stayed, the greater the danger. In 15 minutes or so, I had done my task and carried away a couple of sacks of equipment. The following day, I was suddenly a 'hero,' and a phalanx of journalists waited for me in the assembly hall. For this deed, I was awarded the Hero medal, second class, something I am still perplexed about. Do I really deserve a medal? How hard was it to unscrew a few bolts?

The next task was to recover the whole tank with all the delicate instruments recovered. Shenyang Military Region assembled a multi-skilled team of experts known as 'Team-62'. On 28 March, Team-62, all 30 or so experts, arrived at the battlefront. With the team of experts came a large reel of steel cables, and one manual winch: something like an anchor winch on a man-of-war from the Napoleonic era. Of the 30 or so members of Team-62, there was one female, the only female to enter the Zhenbao Island battlefront, Xiong Kefang (熊克芳) was her name. In 2005, Professor Xiong gave an exclusive interview with one of the premier military monthly magazines – *Ordnance Knowledge* – about her involvement in recovering the T-62 tank. The following is an abridged version of that interview:



Xiong Jiangcheng, the Hero Diver. The Shenyang Military Region awarded him Second-grade honour for his work in salvaging the T-62 tank. (Open source)

Journalist: Tell the readers something about yourself.

Xiong: I was born in 1933 in Henan Province in central China. In 1969, I was 36 years old, married with a two-year-old son. I joined the Eighth Route Army, the precursor of the modern-day PLA, at the age of 7. I fought the Japanese and later the Nationalists. In 1954 I won a scholarship to attend the Beijing Industrial University (now Beijing Polytechnic University), reading mechanical engineering and specialising in internal combustion engines.

Journalist: Why did the authority choose you to go to Zhenbao Island?

Xiong: I really had no clue. They knew that I had been a soldier and could hack it in rough conditions. I was then working on upgrading the Type 59 tank engine from 520 to T-62's 580 hp. At that time, the bottleneck was the radiator cooling system. When I was assigned the mission, I left my son with a close relative and immediately hopped to the train station without saying goodbye to my husband. All I did was leave a note on the kitchen table.

Journalist: What were the conditions like when you arrived at Zhenbao Island?

Xiong: After a long train journey, a truck that took us the last 10km stopped at the bottom of a hill. There was a large tent, that was the place we slept. All the men and I were in one tent. It was inconvenient, but I am used to roughing it. From our tent to where the tank was about 1,000m, on a good day, we could easily see it. As soon as we arrived, the winch system was set up with the help of some soldiers. I remember the Soviets had helicopters and airplanes up most of the day to watch what we were doing. Occasionally lousy weather prevented these planes from flying, but our activities also made quite a bit of noise, giving their snipers and gunners something to aim for. While these intrusions did not hurt anyone, they did stop us from working. One time, the cable broke during the shelling. We did try to mask our noise with two tractors, but it did not entirely prevent them from making a nuisance with sniping and shelling.

Journalist: Tell me what happened next?

Xiong: My job was to check out the engine and cooling system of the T-62 tank. I requested to board the tank, but initially, Shenyang Military Region did not allow me to go, fearing for my safety. Ultimately, due to my persistence, they relented and sent two soldiers to protect me. I tried to board the tank, but one shell landed too close for comfort, and I lost my footing on the caterpillar track. I fell backward into a hole in the river. Luckily the soldiers held on to me, stopping me from being totally submerged in the freezing water. But my padded pants were wet. The soldiers asked me to go back and change, but I told them I could manage. I am not a princess and stepped into the tank with a torch in hand. I felt around and discovered that there was no bulkhead wall, and I could look into the engine compartment as well as put my hand in and have a good feel around. To my surprise, the engine of the T-62 was almost the same as our T-59 MBT.

Journalist: I heard that Navy divers were involved in recovering the Soviet tank. Can you tell our readers what happened?

Xiong: Yes, it's true. Navy divers did come. Initially, the tank was on the ice, but the relentless pounding by the Soviets weakened the ice, and the tank eventually fell through the ice into the river. The river was so cold that the divers had to take some spirits to warm up.

When the T-62 fell through the ice, no matter how many men were on the winch, the tank would not budge. The river was not



An oil painting depicting Combat Hero (posthumous) Yu Qingyang (1944–1969). Yu's heroism was a key figure in the patriotic education of Chinese children during the 1960s–1980s. (PLAP 1970 and open source)

deep, but most parts were at least two metres deep. What made it even more difficult was the layer of mud at the bottom of the river. Once the tank was in the river, it was like being superglued to the bottom. No amount of manpower managed to move the tank even by an inch and even the steel cable broke. To get the tank unstuck from the mud, the Chinese needed to have divers clear a path for the tank to move and attach a new cable to the tank's tow hook. Selected for the task were Navy divers from the North Sea Fleet. Like their Army colleagues, many were eager to volunteer for the job after diver team captain Yu Minghai (于明海) announced the assembly of divers. After much debate, three men were selected; they were Sui Chuanxiang (隋传香), Xiong Jiancheng (熊建成), Li Xueshi (李学时), and Dong Zhenfa (董振发). With them came four sets of Mk-693 one-piece dry suits. Halfway to Zhenbao Island came two more men from the Armoured Corps. On arrival, they were joined by Zhang Shuquan (张书全), Zhang Lide (张礼德) from Liaoning Military Region, Shi Baoyuan and Wang Pushan, armour experts from the Shenyang Military Region. Protected by three riflemen, this team was given a code name: 'The Fifth Squad.' That evening from Harbin Waterworks came a much-improved geared winch. It was smaller, thus less of a target, enabling greater working efficiency.

After the Navy divers had arrived, the first thing to do was make a series of holes in the ice to enable the divers to access the water. It was a hazardous task, for as soon as the Soviets found out, they rained artillery shells on any Chinese activities. After much perseverance, a 10m wide channel was opened despite these difficulties, allowing the sunken tank to be dragged. On the morning of 12 April, the four divers, now changed to army green uniforms to disguise their presence, prepared to work underwater. Li Xueshi, one of the divers, recalled:

> When I got to the front line, I saw all the dead trees, stripped of the branches and leaves, a series of lifeless poles. We were brought before Zhang Shuquan, the tank expert who gave us the final briefing. When you walk out, you listen to the team leader. If he said, 'take cover,' you must lie down immediately. Good job, I listened. As soon as the team leader shouted, I leapt down, and a bomb landed nearby as soon as I hit the ice. I thought to myself, 'I would have died.'

The only time safe to approach the tank was during twilight. Not too dark when the Soviets could use their starlight scopes, but dark enough to obscure their telescopes. The first to go down was Xiong Jiancheng. Xiong was an experienced diver who enlisted back in 1953. Prime Minister Zhou Enlai gave him the Hero Diver accolade when he rescued a beached Chinese merchant vessel. The team leader told Xiong: 'maximum 30 minutes only.' But before 30 minutes were up, Xiong's head emerged from the icy water. Xiong was waving his arm. Something was not right. As soon as his head popped up, his teammates dragged him up, semi-frozen, and dived into a trench. As soon as they hit the bottom of the trench, the Soviet bombs landed. The reason Xiong waved his arm was that his dry suit had ripped open and icy water began to fill it. The first attempt failed. Next to dive was Dong Zhenfa. He was unable to find the tank. The divers worked through the night, diving five times, but still could not find the tank.

In the late afternoon of the next day, they tried again. This time, Xiong, the second person to dive, managed to find the tank. He said: 'I could not see a thing. The fingers became my eyes. About two-thirds of the tank was in the mud, and the towing eyelets at the rear of the tank were missing.' Later in the afternoon, Xiong dived again. This time he managed to find one towing eyelet, sunken in the mud, and he successfully attached two steel cables to the eyelet. Before the tank could be winched, a new round of intensive bombardment by the Soviets severed the steel cables. It was back to square one. The following recollection was taken from Zhang Shuquan's autobiography *63 Days on Zhenbao Island*:

> During that time, I basically lived on sausages and vodka. Poor diet and lack of sleep gave me a mouth full of ulcers. In the beginning, we encountered many problems, some were because of the cold weather, and the other was the constant inference by the Soviets. I was summoned to the HQ every morning to report on last night's progress. Bad news inevitably ended with the boss giving me a dressing down. The only thing I could do was say, 'I would try harder.' On the 18th, the weather changed, signalling the beginning of the thaw. Some ice sheets broke free, and they created a moving battering ram. Thick blocks of ice crashed against each other and could also cause danger to our divers. The thinning ice meant walking on the frozen river could now be dangerous. I could testify this myself, for I fell through the ice



First class accolade recipient and Combat Hero, Hua Yujie (1944–2017). Hua is wearing a Model 65 uniform, the red star cap badge is made of Zinc alloy. Behind one of the red collar tabs will be the soldier's name, blood group and unit code. (PLAP 1970)

> and nearly drowned. My guardian angel must have been with me, for I survived many close shaves. Many Soviet bombs landed so close to me that I thought this had to be my end. I escaped, but my poor signaller, Young Li, caught the full weight of the blast, and when the smoke cleared, all that was left was his shoes.

This lull also gave the Chinese a chance to do some troop rotation. 378th Artillery Regiment was relieved, as was No. 5 Company, 201st Regiment. Now there were replacement men from No. 7 Company to man the winch and provide security for the tank recovery team. While this was happening, the thaw continued, and this presented new problems to the recovery team. First, heavy equipment could not be brought to the ice, and second, the melting snow made the bad roads impossible to pass through, severely impeding communications. New diving equipment was brought forward to replace the flimsy SCUBA sets. A traditional copper helmet heavy diving suit was on loan from Harbin Waterworks. With this also came two Model-651 recovery tanks. To mask the sound, two heavy-duty tractors and 10 smaller tractors were on-site. Aside from distractions, these tractors were doing valuable work by building bunkers for shelter.

Using the new diving suit made the underwater work go much smoother. The job of attaching the steel cable to the tank was completed without hiccups. By this time, after numerous false starts, the turret was already separated from the chassis. This made the recovery job simpler as the turret was much lighter and soon was dragged onshore, and immediately covered and camouflaged. Despite having Soviet helicopters circling in the sky, the Soviets discovered nothing.

On 30 April, orders were given to give the final push and drag the tank body up. As usual, the work was carried out using the cover of darkness. Before dawn broke, the remaining lower half of the tank was on dry land. Tons of water was drained out, and immediately the hull was placed in a high earth berm shelter. The job was 90 percent done, but the last stretch was just as important.

The temporary tank shelter was some 3km from the nearest road, and the task of dragging the tank out of the reach of Soviet artillery had to be done without alerting them. To disguise the move, the tractors had to keep up their work as a distraction. Because the T-62 was still locked in gear, the wheels could not move, making moving the tank extremely difficult. Trees were cut back, creating a path on top of the two Model-651 recovery tanks, and another heavy-duty tractor was added to the tank recovery job. On 2 May, the tank reached Wulindong, and technicians from the Harbin tank factory came and reassembled the tank, just enough for a propaganda photo shoot and a congratulatory ceremony. At last, the Chinese were able to celebrate. Zhang Shuquan was there, and he recalled the scene:

> From a distance, the tank looked OK. The tank was placed in the centre like an altarpiece. Men from the 201st Regiment who participated in the recovery were on either side. They were in high spirits and singing. The congratulatory messages were read out to kick off the ceremony, followed by the awards presentation. No. 1 and 5 Company from the 201st Regiment were awarded a unit citation. The divers from Lvshun (旅顺) (formerly Port Arthur) were also awarded 2nd and 3rd class honours. Of the 69 armour technicians who came, 48 were given awards. Jiang Mingzhou (姜明洲), the No. 2 mechanical team leader, Heilongjiang Province Construction Corp., was even invited to be a VIP guest at the national day celebration in Beijing.

What's Next?

After disengaging the gears, the tank was uploaded onto a low-loader and was transported to East is Red Secondary School to be displayed for locals to see. In the afternoon, the tank was taken to the railhead to be shipped to Factory 6409 in Fushun City in Liaoning Province to be examined by tank experts. After some work in replacing the wheel and damage to the gun barrel, the tank was inspected by senior commanders from Shenyang Military Region before being moved to the nation's capital's Military Museum. Tank experts like Xiong Kefang were again given a chance to examine the tank. She was working on increasing radiation from the engine without expanding the size of the radiator. Here she found the answer; the fin-plate radiator was the solution she needed. The infrared night-scope, dual-axis gun stabiliser, and the high-performance diesel engine taken from the T-62 were invaluable to Chinese tank designers. To strengthen combat readiness and deal more effectively with the Soviet tank threat, on 23 August 1969, the State Council held a professional meeting on upgrading Chinese anti-tank weapons, which were found to be inadequate against the latest Soviet armour. The Zhenbao Island incident also spurred the Chinese to upgrade their armour force. The result was a new generation of tanks and APCs, such as the Model-69 MBT and the Model-63 APC.

Despite the cessation of large-scale combat, tension remained high at the Sino-Soviet border. While all attention was on the sunken tank, the Chinese maintained their grip on Zhenbao Island through regular patrols. However, the thaw made the journey to the island more perilous. On 1 May, when a reconnaissance patrol led by Sun Yaomin (孙耀民) tried to cross the inner river that separates Zhenbao Island from the Chinese mainland, the only way was to use rubber boats. However, the width of the Ussuri River on the Soviet side was much broader and could not be crossed without using bridging equipment. This prevented the Soviets landing any troops on the island to interdict the Chinese. The only way was to harass the Chinese was by using long-range machine gun fire and snipers. Leftover mines from previous demining operations were

still giving Chinese patrols headaches. On 4 May, Sun was again on the island, but his patrol was not so lucky this time. A mine took out all seven members of the patrol. Qu Changsheng (曲长生), the patrol commander, lost the lower part of his leg, and Sun was hit on the arm by shrapnel.

While the battle was still raging, on 21 March, Moscow did try to reach out to the Chinese; Alexei Kosygin, the Premier of the Soviet Union, called Beijing in an attempt the talk directly to Mao through the long-unused hotline between China and the Soviet Union, but the Chinese telephone operator refused to transfer the call on the grounds that Kosygin was 'a bad guy' and 'he was not qualified to speak to Chairman Mao.' Kosygin tried again later that night; this time, he used the Ministry of Foreign Affairs hotline and received a more friendly reception. Li Lianqing (李连庆), the deputy director of the Soviet and Eastern Europe office at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was on the receiving end and duly took notes of the Soviet desire to have a face-to-face meeting with his counterpart Zhou Enlai. Behind closed doors, Mao's immediate response to Kosygin's reach out was positive, although he maintained hawkish defiance against Soviet aggression, calling the nation to prepare for war. Zhou echoed Mao's sentiment, but he added that although war clouds were looming, war was not going to break out tomorrow. He added: 'After all, we have nuclear weapons too.' According to Zhang Yunsheng (张云生), the principal private secretary to Defence Minister Lin Bao, in the six months after the Zhenbao Island incident, Lin never uttered the 'W-word' once. It was only in September, during a regular CMC meeting, that Lin said anything about war. He said: 'It looks like war is not going to happen soon, but we must still be prepared, be 80 percent prepared.' During the height of the war in March, Mao commissioned the four grand marshals, Chen Yi (陈毅), Ye Jianying (叶剑英), Xu Xiangqian (徐向前), and Nie Rongzhen (聂荣臻) to conduct a study concerning the likelihood of war. The report, entitled *Preliminary Estimates of the War Situation* was published on 11 July. The marshals concurred with Mao's estimate that the Soviets would not attack China. First, they were not ready, and second, their focus was still on Europe. But because of high tensions between the two nations, China needed to raise its alert status and prepare for unintended consequences. On the ground, only the three north-eastern provinces closest to the Soviet Union could see any form of increased heightened tension. For the rest of the country, life continued as usual.

8
BATTLE OF TIELIEKETI, 13 AUGUST 1969

Heading for the Rocks

Despite the downplay by Mao of an all-out war with the Soviets, the Chinese were still gearing up to prepare for a possible conflict; however, their focus was entirely on the northern border, and the western border became a blind spot that eventually spelled disaster for China. Like Zhenbao Island, the origins of the battle of Tielieketi were complex; however, they can be boiled down to the imprecise language used and the haphazard manner in which the borderline was drawn up, often the result of a rough pencil line on a large-scale map that lacked accuracy. In the age when there were no satellites or use of theodolite and survey, it was impossible to mark the border posts with any degree of accuracy.

In most cases, borderlines tend to follow easily recognisable geographical features, such as river valleys or mountain ridgelines. But in the case of Tielieketi, much of the land where the battle occurred had nothing: it was just a featureless desert, detritus flatland. Without easily recognisable natural features, where China ended and where the Soviet Union began were always a source of argument. To complicate matters more, when the borderline was drawn up back in the nineteenth century, where and how the line of demarcation fell was decided singularly by the Russians without much consultation with Chinese officials. Worse, how the borderline fell was determined arbitrarily by politicians without survey nor any consultation with the local populations; much of whom were Kazakh herders who, for hundreds of years, drifted as they pleased, chasing pastoral lands. So, when a barbed wire fence sprang up, it not only split up tribes and families, it prevented herders from making a living. To the herders, there was nothing more important than their sheep; if the sheep were hungry, they needed to eat, fence or no fence. This was



The area where the battle took place was open grassland such as this. Those with long-range weapons obviously had the advantage. The KPTV 14.5mm HMG on the BTR-60PB with a range of up to 3,000m could easily suppress the Chinese, who had only light infantry weapons. This photo shows a mass intrusion by Soviet APCs on 2 May 1969. (PLAP)

the straw that broke the camel's back, the spark that caused the battle of Tielieketi.

Like many things, disaster does not come without warning. With the benefit of hindsight, looking back, there were numerous signs that things were not going well. Aside from the increased tension brought about by the clash at Zhenbao Island, there were scuffles at multiple points along the long Sino-Soviet border. The first incident came on 10 June when the Chinese border militia clashed with their counterpart, the Soviet Border Guard. In this brief skirmish, a female Chinese militiawoman Sun Longzhen (孙龙珍), only 29 years old and later found to be pregnant, died. The Soviet side also suffered casualties, one dead, five injuries, and three-pack horses were also killed. This incident led to the Chinese beefing up their border patrols. Tacheng Military District decided to raise a new unit, the No. 4 Battalion Border Guard Force (Unit code 304), with a tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) covering the Tuoli (托里) and Yumin (裕民) area. This new unit consisted of a cadre force from elements of the cavalry force from Tacheng Military District, some infantry, as well as some experienced border guards. Despite the cadre team, this force essentially consisted mainly of inexperienced recruits: an important fact to explain why the battle of Tielieketi turned out so different from the Battle of Zhenbao Island.

After gaining permission from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence, as well as the green light from the various military district chiefs, an aggressive stance was taken in patrolling along the disputed areas. After all, by adopting the mantra of 'Procession is 9/10ths of the law', if China could take a stance over the disputed areas, it may help future negotiations. To implement the decisions by the CMC, Tacheng Military District decided to expand its existing standing patrol. To better protect the patrol from any ambushes, the senior officers of the Tacheng Military District decided to preposition a covering force on a suitable hilltop to oversee the area and, if needed, provide covering long-range fire. But after conducting a battle appreciation, it was discovered that a force of 100 men was required. The border guard force at Tielieketi had only 20 men. Therefore, in order to implement the decision to increase the standing patrol along the border, on 8 July the leaders at Tielieketi submitted a revised plan to the Tacheng Military District with a request for immediate reinforcement. However, the request was not given the attention it deserved and was left in the 'pending tray' for a decision, which sadly never came. After all, this was when China was mired deep in the chaos caused by the Cultural Revolution. Soldiers spent more time in political meetings than military training.

Yuan Guoxiao (袁国孝), a recruit newly posted to the area, remembers that prior to the battle, he had one session on the range. Three days before the fateful patrol, Yuan was given a brief lesson of dry training on the Model 67 anti-tank rifle grenade. For most of the first month, Yuan spent time guarding a warehouse. In addition to that, he was assigned to cut firewood and grass as well as growing vegetables. The ranks and files were not the only ones that were out of practice; officers and some veterans had forgotten much of the basic bread and butter of small-unit leadership skills, including map reading! If having raw green recruits was not bad enough, many of the officers, albeit with many years of soldiering experience under their belt, were transferees from other sectors. Take, for example, Yuan Changxin (袁常信), the border post commander at Tielieketi, was also the new kid on the block, having arrived at his new post just days before. To get acquainted with his TAOR, he went on one handover patrol with the outgoing border post commander. Both men, whether because of oversight or just carelessness, failed to take any precautions; the Soviet OPs in the area carefully monitored every step they took during the entire patrol. Their movements were unlike regular patrols, which raised some concern with the Soviets, who as a result beefed up the border patrol force with reserve troops and a couple of APCs. This proved to be a critical decision.



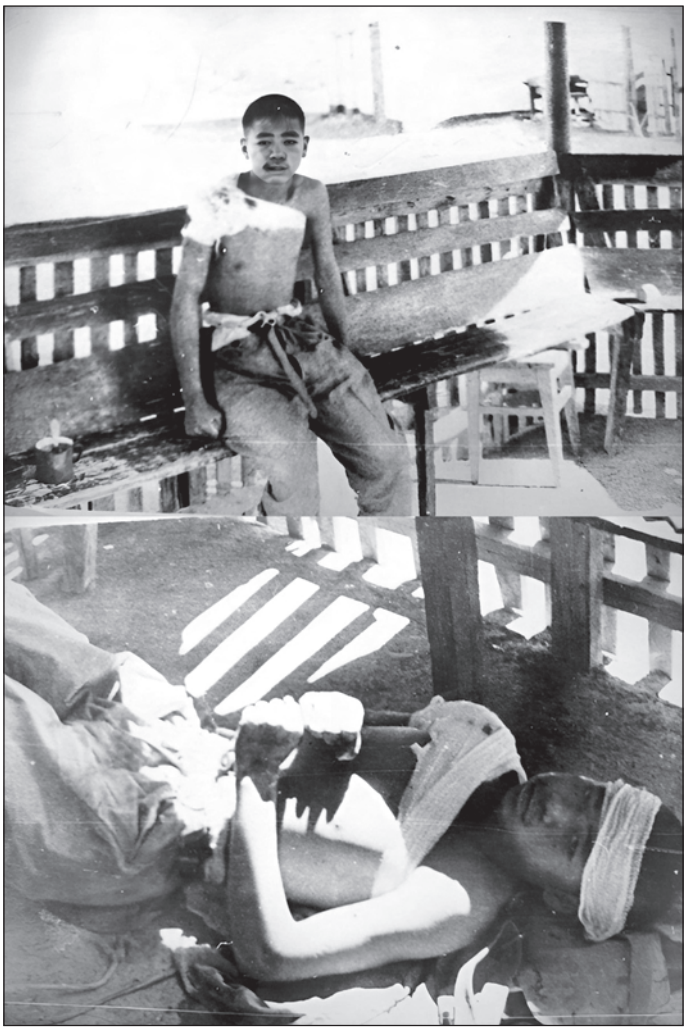
This picture was first shown to the world in the July 1969 edition of the *PLA Pictorial*, a popular publicity magazine of the era. Here the Chinese accuse Soviet border guards of blocking the movement of sheep, thus hindering the lives of civilians in the area. (PLAP)

As August approached, Yuan recalled heightened activities. The officers were always busy in meetings, and the prevailing gossip was that something big was being planned. Yuan's suspicion was confirmed when a troupe of some 20 journalists including those from the *PLA Daily*, Xinhua News Agency, Beijing TV, and *People's Daily*, descended on Tieliekeli.

On 10 August, the Chinese discovered one of their men was missing and, after an exhausting search, found a severely beaten corpse lying by a border marker. In response, the Chinese heightened their alert status, trenches were dug, and telephone cables were laid. The Soviet counterparts reported all these activities. As far as the Soviets were concerned, the Chinese were up to something no good!

If the Soviets were thinking badly of the Chinese, the Chinese were reciprocating this sense of ill feeling. Tacheng Military District Political Officer Wang Xinguang (王新光) recalled hearing tanks and roars of engines, and he reported this to his superior in Xinjiang Military Region. The deduction from this was obvious. The Soviets were going to attack. Otherwise, why would there be tracked vehicles? On 12 August, one day before the battle, Wang was nervous and asked Xinjiang Military Region if tomorrow's regular patrol schedule should still be taking place. He got a wishy-washy reply; 'Your request has been received. That's all.'

Without any firm direction, the patrol would still go ahead as planned. Together with command and signal troops, there were supporting troops, a sizeable covering force, and the standing patrol, totalling 109 men with 10 journalists. A special command HQ was set up to manage this whole exercise to ensure this patrol would run like clockwork. Assigned as overall commander was Qi Qianzhai (亓谦斋), the deputy Commander of the Industrial Military Sub-District, and Tan Kaiyun (谭开云), the political officer as his deputy. Nan Zhongzhou (南仲周), the deputy political officer of Tacheng Military Sub-District, was rushed over at the last minute to support the command team. In hindsight, the main HQ being located some 120km from the border was a big mistake. The forward command post (or tactical headquarters), was situated on the eastern slope of High Ground 708.6, some 1,000m from the covering force position. The position was somewhat exposed, without proper shelter and



A photo collage of Yuan Guoxiao, seen with bandages to his forearm and forehead. Yuan was hit on the forearm, and splinters from the bullet also cut his forehead. (From a Soviet magazine of 1969)



This picture was first shown to the world in the July 1969 July edition of the *PLA Pictorial*, a popular publicity magazine of the era. Here the Chinese accuse Soviet border guards of blocking the movement of their sheep, thus hindering the lives of civilians in the area. (PLAP)

sandbags for protection, nor was it covered by camouflage netting. In this so-called Tac HQ were three commanders, Kang Youfu (康有福), commander of No. 4 Battalion Border Guard Force; Political officer Pu Qiwu(蒲齐武) and Yin Xiaozi (尹效智), a staff officer from Tacheng Military Sub-District. Supporting them were Yuan Changxin (袁长信), the Tielieketi Border Post chief, and his political officer Zhou Zhixin (周智新). Yuan and Zhou were separate from the three commanders, located at the bottom of the slope holding on to the only backpack radio linked to the only radio (Model-71 radio) in the 109-man border patrol force, with the 11-man standing patrol.

Of the 11 men, five were officers; Pei Yingzhang (裴映章), the patrol C-in-C, Li Guozhen (李国贞), Gao Chunlin (高春林), Fan Zhongxuan (樊中宣) and Guo Yufeng (郭玉峰); Li Lianxiang (李连祥), a journalist from 8.1 Movie Production Studio; Wang Mingyuan (王明远) translator; Signaller Cao Xinlong (曹新龙); and three riflemen, Liu Yunzeng (刘允增), Li Guichang (李贵昌), and Jing Changxiong (景长雄). With them were one Type 56 (copy of Soviet RPD) LMG, two Type 56 (copy of Soviet RPG-2) rocket launchers, eight Type 67 70mm rifle grenades, and several Type 56 assault rifles (copy of AK-47), Type 56 semi-automatic rifles (copy of Soviet SKS rifle), Type 54 (copy of Soviet TT) pistols, a few Type 3 anti-tank (copy RKG-3) grenades, as well as a bundle of stick anti-personnel grenades. For communication, the patrol carried one Model-71 backpack radio.[1]

The central covering force consisted of 13 men. Nine of these were lying low on a nameless high ground (on the Soviet map, it is known as Kamennaya Hill); Squad Commander Li Jian (李建), Riflemen Yu Changan (余长安), Zhang Jili (张积礼), Liu Jianxin (刘建新), Wang Chengzhen (王承贞), Yin Qingqi (尹清启), Yuan Guoxiao (袁国孝); two journalists, Wang Yibing (王一兵) from the official news agency, Xinhua News and Wen Binglin (温炳林) from the State TV network, China Central TV (CCTV). The remaining four; Rifleman Cheng Guluan (程古栾), Li Daolin (李道林), Wang Baoren (王宝仁), commanded by Officer Yang Zhenlin (杨振林) (a company 2iC from the area infantry battalion) were on the northern slope of High Ground 676. In overall charge was Yang Zhenlin. Twenty men and two journalists formed the left covering force and were located on the northwest slope of High Ground 708.6, Position 2. In charge of this group was Xiao Fagang (肖发刚), the company 2iC from the military sub-district infantry battalion. Finally, the right covering force consisting of 18 men (two officers, one journalist, and 15 riflemen) was located 600m off the south-eastern slope of High Ground 695. This position was to be known as Position 3. In charge was Fan Jinzhong (范进忠), the Company Commander of No. 1 Company, of the military sub-district infantry battalion. All three covering

forces were in position by 0530 hrs. Last but not least was the force reserve. This consisted of 36 men, three of which were officers. They were all located on the eastern slope of High Ground 708.6. According to the orders, the reserve force went into position much earlier than the covering force, and the way in which they arrived at their forming up point was totally exposed to the Soviets, thus alerting the Soviets that the Chinese were up to something.

Combat medic Ding Dianxun (丁殿勋) was one of the border patrol force on that fateful day. He remembered that at the crack of dawn on 13 August, all the teams were ready at the Tielieketi Border Post to occupy their assigned stations. Ding said:

> This assembly was unlike others. In addition, to the regular roll-call, the squad commanders made an extra effort to check and double-check our equipment and weapons. There was a slight breeze, and the sky was filled with millions of stars as we marched off. It was quite a sight. I recalled it was around 2 a.m.

The Chinese are here!

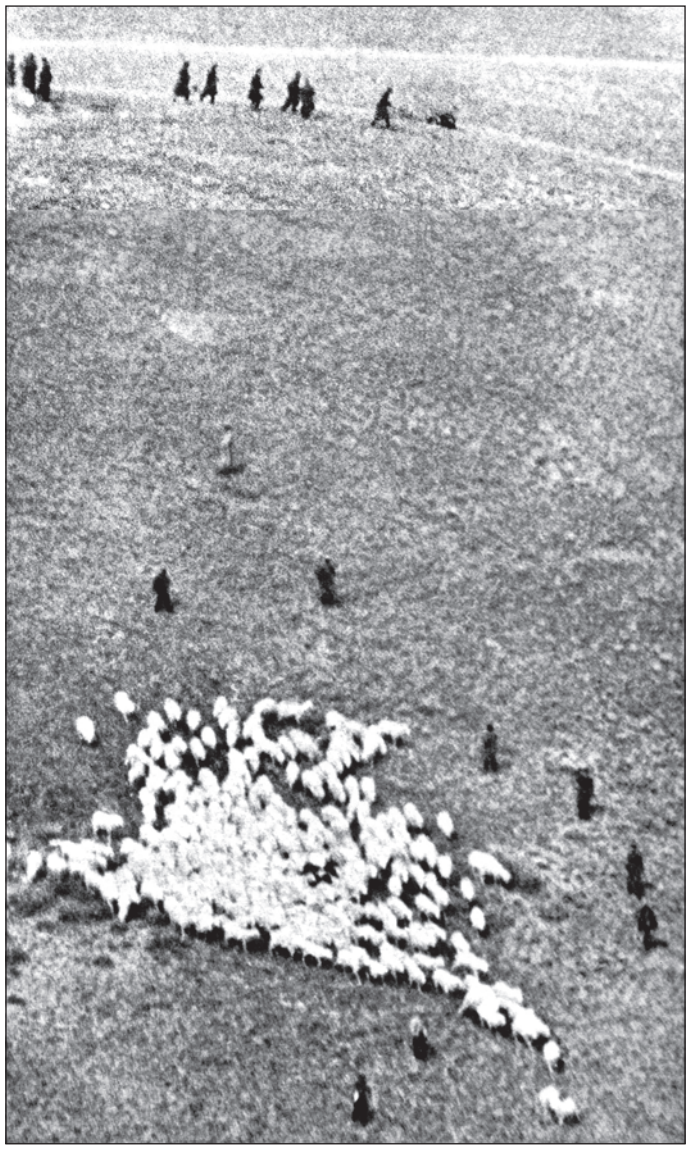
At the crack of dawn, Junior-Sergeant Dulepov and Private Yegortsev set off for the nameless hill (Kamennaya Hills) and discovered the Chinese there digging shell scrapes. He shouted something, probably his attempt to speak Chinese, but the Chinese ignored him and continued digging. Lieutenant E. B. Govor, the deputy chief of the 14th (Zhalanashkol) Border Post, was alerted and raised the general alarm. Lieutenant Colonel P. I. Nikitenko, chief-of-staff of the 130th Uch-Aral Border Detachment, took a Mi-4 helicopter, overflew the area where the Chinese were reported, and made an ariel reconnaissance of the scene. As Colonel Niktenko overflew the nameless hill (Kamennaya Hills) where the Chinese central covering force was, initially, the Chinese took little notice of the buzzing helicopter. Riflemen Yuan Guoxiao recalls the moment:

> As the helicopter was buzzing over us, the journalist Wen Binglin shouted to me and one lad, a name I have forgotten, to stand up and raise my fist, looking like I was shouting out in protest. As I was young and knew nothing, I did what he asked me to do. Later, he said I would be famous.

After the first helicopter left the area, another helicopter came, flying deep into the Chinese territory over the Chinese HQ and the 36 operational reserves on High Ground 708.6. Aside from the helicopters, APCs (BTR-60PBs) belonging to the Motorised Manoeuvre Platoon, under the command of Junior Lieutenant V. V. Puchkov, were also observed moving toward the Chinese.

When the deputy C-in-C of Yili Military District Ren Shutian (仁书田) and Wang Xiusen (王秀森), the commander of the Tacheng Military Sub-District, heard that the Soviets had helicopters and APCs at the border, he immediately reported these findings to his superior at the Xinjiang Military Region. He strongly suggested that the patrol must stop. At 0830, Ren received a reply from his boss: 'the patrol would continue.'

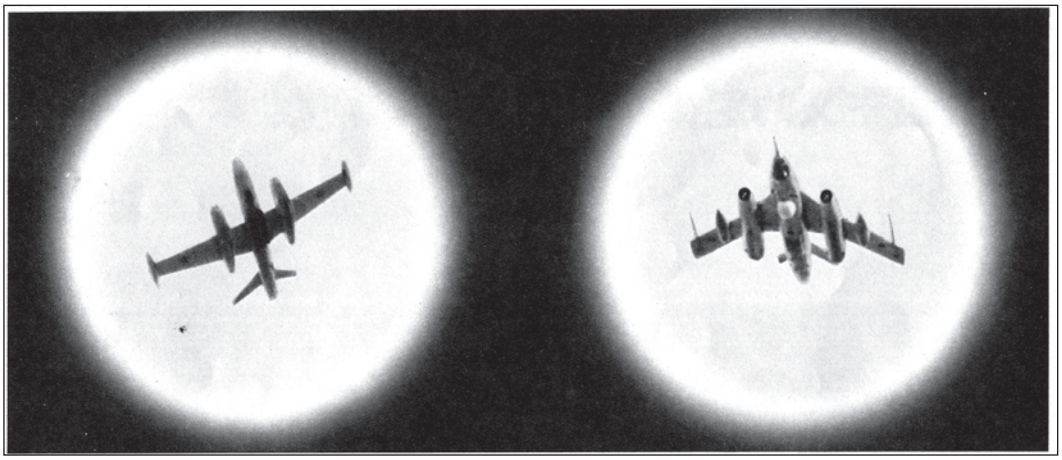
Initially, the plan was to set the patrol off at 10:00 a.m. (Beijing time), precisely when the Chinese and the Soviets would start their regular border point meeting. However, someone somehow decided if the patrol set off at 10:00 a.m., there would be a good chance that the Soviets at the meeting may be informed and cause a fuss at the meeting. The new set-off time would be 9.15am. The planned route for the patrol was to set off from High Ground 695, proceed to Border Post 38, and then to Border Post 39 on a southerly course. The patrol would go past what the Soviets called Kamennaya Hill



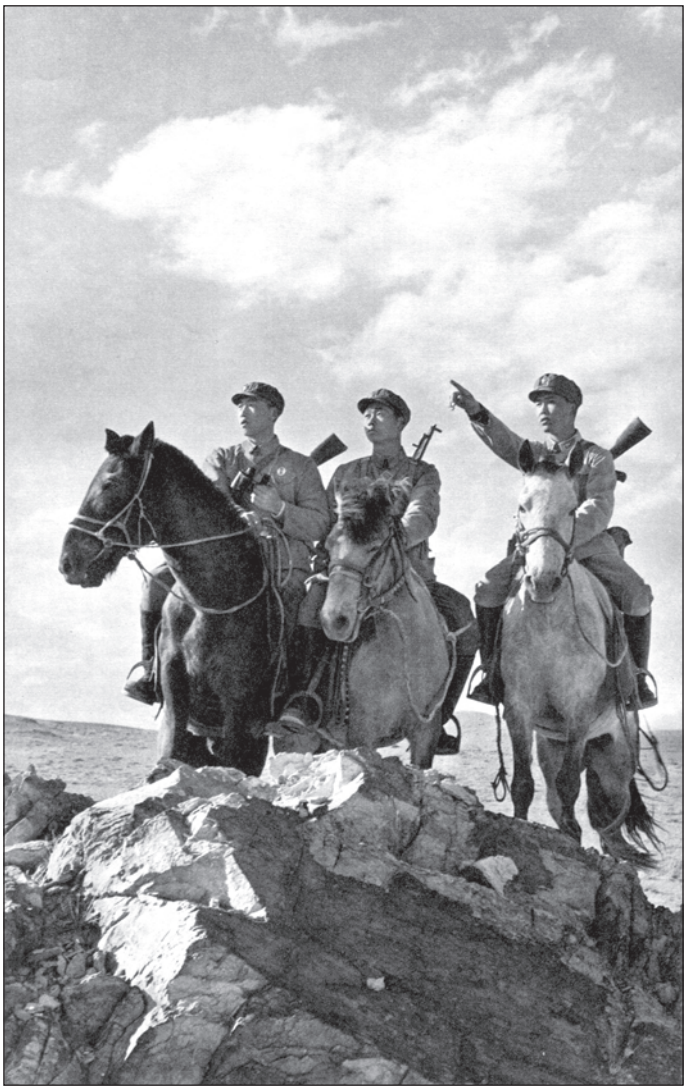
Soviet border guards (at top of the photo) are seen here trying to flank Chinese shepherds and drive them back over the border. When national borders are delimited, they are often done by the military and politicians without considering the lives of the locals in the area. Often these artificial barriers block farmers' and herders' access to water points and pastures, sowing seeds of problems in the future. (PLAP)

('Nameless Hill' or sometimes Point 676 in the Chinese literature) and Pravaya Hill (known as High Ground 708.6 to the Chinese). These two landmarks were, according to the Soviets, inside their side of the border. The borderline used to follow a course hugging a contour line that skirted around the western side of the hill but when the Soviets replaced the old fence, the new line went in a straight line from Border Post 38 to Border Post 39. The Chinese were not consulted and therefore did not recognise this change. In order to assert their claim, they continued their patrol following the old borderline, giving the Soviets a reason, especially after the debacle of Zhenbao Island, to eject the Chinese with such force.

At 9:40 a.m. (Beijing time), Lieutenant Colonel P. I. Nikitenko ordered one BTR-60PB, No. 220, commanded by Lieutenant Govor, to head towards the nameless hill. As the vehicle proceeded westwards, the loudspeaker was blaring out a pre-recorded warning, in Chinese, to return to their border or else the Soviets would open fire. While Govor's vehicle was moving, Lieutenant Puchkov was to lead two APCs (Nos. 217 and 218) heading towards the northern edge of the nameless hill to cut off the patrol under the leadership of Pei Yingzhang. Pei ignored the warning and, by 9:50 a.m., reached



The Chinese accused the Soviets of violating their airspace; according to the Chinese, some Soviet planes penetrated the Chinese airspace by as much as 60km. These photos show typical Soviet reconnaissance aircraft of the day: on the right, a Yakovlev Yak-28R (NATO reporting name Brewer-D) identified by the prominent radar bulge in the lower part of the fuselage); on the left, an Ilyushin Il-28R (NATO reporting name Beagle) identified by the tanks on the wingtips. (PLAP)



Chinese cavalry patrolling the border in the late 1960s. Horse riding skills reamain mandatory for many border security forces in China, as some of the barren terrain, especially in the desert and mountain areas, are still best visited by horses. (PLAP)

the area occupied by the central covering force where recruit soldier Yuan Guoxiao was. Yuan remembers: 'I saw the Soviet APC stopping some 200-plus metres away, and soldiers began to debus from the APCs.' Moments after that, the Soviets began firing, and two Chinese soldiers were injured. Signaller Cao Xinlong immediately sent a contact report. The Tac HQ's instruction to Pei was to keep moving and try to get as close as possible to the central covering force. As the patrol ran towards the central covering force, they gave covering fire. Two more Chinese soldiers from the patrol were injured. Yuan Guoxiao remembers seeing patrol leader Pei bleeding on the face, with his neck all red. As Signaller Cao continued to give the latest information, he was shot dead: the radio was also wrecked, and the patrol lost communications with the headquarters. Without radio, the only remaining means of communication was with signal flares. The pre-agreed signal was that one flare meant stop firing, two flares meant returning fire, and three flares were to withdraw. However, during the chaos, the signaller at the Tac HQ fired two flares, but he thought that the patrol did not see it, so he fired another two soon after the first two flares. The patrol and the covering force groups saw four flares, and they desperately tried to decipher the meaning of the four flares.

Before the battle, Yuan Guoxiao was positioned at the foot of the nameless hill with the central covering force. Although he changed battle positions several times, he was far from the road, meaning that the rifle grenades he carried were out of range and had no hope of hitting anything on the track. When the Soviet APC began to move up the hill, recruit Yuan fired the rifle grenade. This was the first time he live-fired this weapon; all his preparations for battle were just dry training. The grenade went out some 50m, but it was still far away from the APC. He raised his gun and fired the second round, but it still went out at most 60m away, far from the intended target. He loaded the third round, and before he could fire it, a bullet came over and hit him directly on the shoulder; a stone splashed by the shot hit Xiao Yuan's temple, cutting his scalp and lips, and recruit Yuan was knocked unconscious. The intense Chinese fire hit Lieutenant Puchkov's APC several times, and Puchkov, as well as Pishchulev, the driver, were both injured. At around 12:00 a.m., the Soviet APCs came to the east-side high ground and launched a charge at the Chinese position with 30 men. The Chinese suffered heavy casualties, and 12 men remained uninjured. Unable to support the patrol group, at 1310 hrs the commanding group gave the signal to stop firing and withdraw from the battle. The withdrawal was completed at 1530 hrs.

This brief battle resulted in 20 Soviet troop casualties and Junior Sergent Dulepov, the dog handler from the Zhalanashkol Border Post, and Private V. P. Ryazanov, the radio operator at the '19 Siding' Border Post were killed. On the Chinese side, the casualties were much heavier. A total of 28 dead (all 11 members of the patrol group, 10 of the 13 members of the central covering group, four of the 18 reserve group, and three members of the 20 from the left cover group). Twelve Chinese were injured, including Fan Jinzhong, commander of the right cover group and deputy company commander Yang Zhenglin (杨振林) (commander of the middle cover group), Pei Yingzhang (leader of the patrol group), Deputy Commander of Terekti Station, and interpreter Wang Mingyuan

(member of the right cover group), Platoon Commander Gao Chunling (高春苓) of No. 1 Company of the infantry battalion (one of the three officers of the patrol group), Fan Zhongxuan (a member of the right cover group), Company Commander of No. 3 Company, Cavalry Battalion of Tacheng Military Sub-District, Li Guozhen (one of the three officers of the patrol group).

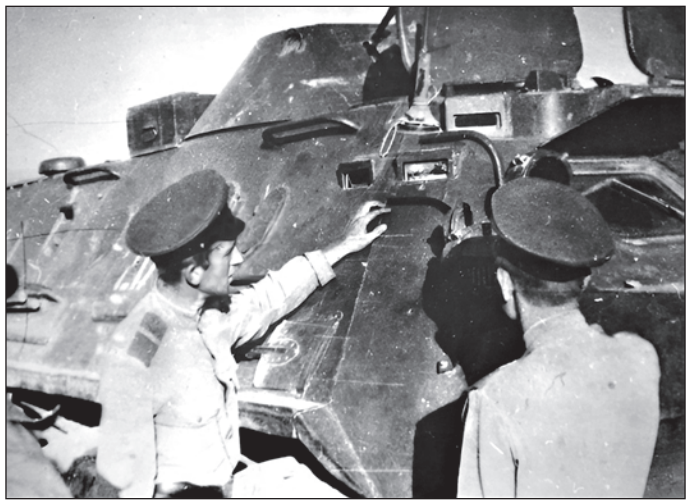
Post-Battle

In addition to decimating the Chinese force, Yuan Guoxiao and three other members of the patrol group were also taken as POWs. Yuan recalled:

> I was knocked unconscious by the enemy's shells, and when I woke up, I found myself lying in the enemy's railway station. I saw Pei Yingzhang, the border post chief, Wen Binglin, the journalist, and Jing Changxiong. Jing was lying next to me on the stretcher. Pei's wound was the most serious; it was a penetrating wound in the neck. I saw him being shot. After he was shot, he crawled to the nameless hill, where he lay still and never breathed a word until he was taken away by the enemy (but later died of his wound). Jing Changxiong was severely wounded in the head and was moaning. Periodically he shouted, 'water, water.' Wen Binglin said to Jing Changxiong: 'Be strong, don't drink the enemy's water.' Later, Wen Binglin said, 'Hang in there, young man. When the Soviets tried to tend to his wounds, he cursed: 'Don't touch me, go away! The Soviets wanted to show him his injuries, but he said, 'Don't touch me; go away! He was later taken away, and later on, I was told, all three had died. That was a month later!
>
> I was later taken to a very small hospital ward. I was detained for 41 days before I was released.' While there, my uniform was in tatters, so I wore a pair of trousers all day. When I was about to be sent back, the Soviets gave me a new suit. As soon as I was back in China, I took off my Soviet clothes and threw them away. When I returned, I realised that my tombstone had already been planted, and I had become a living martyr!

Two weeks after the debacle, the CMC sent an investigation team to Xinjiang and Tielieketi. Over 100 members of the Border Force, the PLA, and local politicians were interviewed, including Long Shujin (龙书金), the commander of the Xinjiang Military Region, Political Officer Wang Enmao (王恩茂), Deputy Commander Sai Fuding(赛福鼎). The report found no one at fault. When Lin Biao, the Minister of Defence, read it, he leapt into a rage and demanded that a culprit be found responsible for the 'mistakes.' Long was chosen as the scapegoat and was sacked and demoted. The Soviets, in turn, awarded 36 members of the Border Guard force, and 14 members were allowed to be demobbed early and return home.

Despite the setback, at no time did the Chinese leadership want to take revenge against the Soviets. However, the hawks in the Soviet Union were not thinking with such level-headedness. The KGB concluded that the Soviet Army would have a tough time in any military incursion into China with such huge distances and a vast population to overcome. The only way to defang the Chinese tiger was to strike with nuclear weapons. But any such move would have significant geopolitical repercussions, and the first thing the Soviets did was sound out the American reaction. First, a strongly worded article in *Pravda* telling the world about an increasingly aggressive China and how dangerous it would be if the dispute between the two communist giants turned nuclear. Next, on 28 August 1969, the *Washington Star* published a message in a prominent position entitled 'The Soviet Union wants to make a surgical nuclear attack



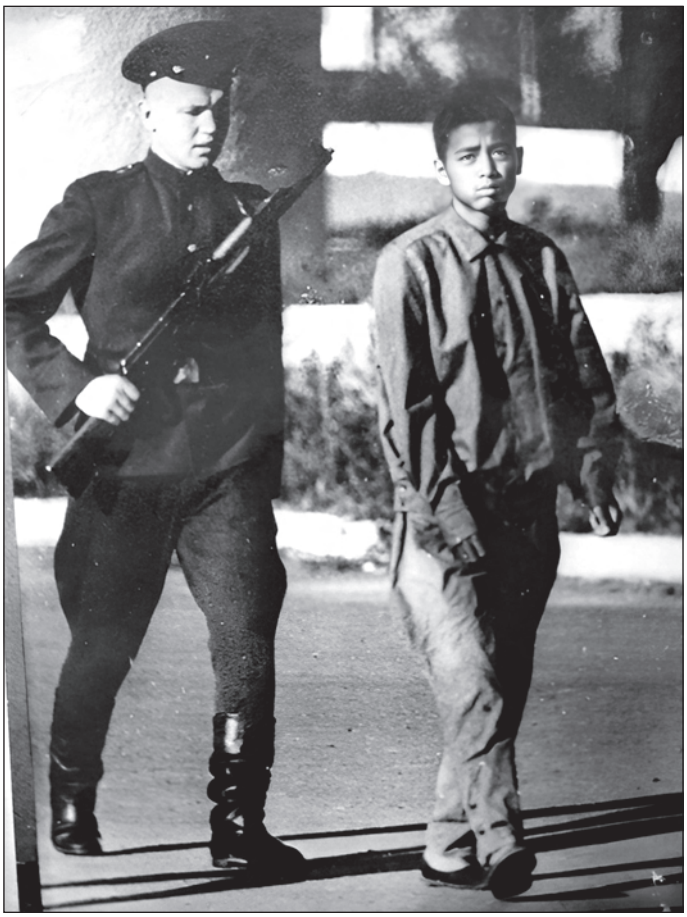
Damage to BTR60-PB No. 217 was quite extensive; vision blocks and antenna mountings were all shot out. Lieutenant Puchkov and Driver Pishchulev were both injured. (Soviet magazine from 1969)



Yuan Guoxiao, the sole survivor from the 13 August incident, is seen at the back with the Type 56 assault rifle. The soldier in the front in prone position is seen here armed with an RPD LMG, known in China as the Type 56 Section MG. (Zhang Yiming)

on China.' The article said: 'According to reliable news, the Soviet Union wants to use medium-range ballistic missiles, carrying millions of tons of nuclear warheads, important military bases for China – Jiuquan, Xichang missile-launching base, Lop Nur nuclear test base, and Beijing, Changchun, Surgical nuclear strikes in important industrial cities such as Anshan.' This article really did shock the Chinese, and messages from the Chinese diplomats in the Soviet Union concurred with this article. Hawks in the Soviet Union were really beating the war drums. For the first time, areas that bordered the Soviet Union went into a state of emergency.

As the world was tottering towards a possible nuclear war, a stroke of luck allowed the four horsemen of the apocalypse to be reined in. On 2 September, Ho Chi Minh, the leader of North Vietnam, died. The diplomats of both sides wanted to take this chance to meet and resolve the differences. Zhou Enlai, the Chinese Prime Minister cum Foreign Minister, went to Hanoi for the funeral. Alexei Kosygin, the



After recovering from gunshot wounds, Yuan Guoxiao is seen here being marched off by a guard. Yuan is seen here wearing Soviet fatigues, which according to his testament, he took off as soon as he went over to the Chinese. (Zhang Yiming)

Soviet Premier representing the Soviet Union, also went to Hanoi but came too late and missed Zhou, who left Hanoi a day before Kosygin landed. However, all was not lost, as Li Xiannian (李先念), the Chinese Deputy Prime Minister, was also in Hanoi. The quick-thinking officials at the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs who accompanied Kosygin to Hanoi took the initiative to give Li a message that Kosygin sought to make a detour to meet with Zhou in China while on his way back to Moscow. Li brought back the news, but Mao and other leaders took time to deliberate, and by the time the message came back to Hanoi, the Chinese diplomats only managed to arrive at the airport as Kosygin's plane lifted off. Saving the day were the North Vietnamese diplomats who brought the Chinese message to the Soviet ambassador and immediately signalled Moscow. The Chinese were equally impatient and, seeing that Kosygin did not reply, summoned the *chargé d'affaires* of the Soviet Embassy in Beijing, who also sent a priority message to Moscow. Kosygin was in Dushanbe, in Tajikistan, when he got the message. On 11 September 1969, together with his aid, Kosygin flew to Beijing, and he met with Zhou, Li Xiannian, the Vice Premier, Xie Fuzhi (谢富治), Secretary of the Secretariat of the Chinese Communist Party and Minister of Public Security, and Qiao Guanhua (乔冠华), a senior diplomat. After much deliberation, both sides decided to abide by four rules to minimise the chances of further armed conflict. These were:

Border situation: Maintain the status quo. (each side to stay where they were);

Avoid armed conflict;

In the area of dispute, create a demilitarised zone to avoid the possibility of border guards of both countries coming into contact;

If any dispute occurs, all arguments are to be resolved by a special department of the Border Force.



Picture taken on 20 August 1969, after the award ceremony. Middle row sitting on chairs, left to right: Border Post Commander Yuan Changxin (袁常信), Battalion Commander Kang Youfu (康有福), next, unknown, centre man with cap, Northern Xinjiang Military District Deputy Commander Ren Shutian (任书田), Xinjiang Military Region Political Officer Cao Siming (曹思明), man in light-coloured jacket, Battalion Political Officer Pu Qiwu (蒲齐武). (Zhang Yiming)

After reaching an agreement, Zhou hosted the Soviet delegations, including members of the Soviet Embassy in Beijing, for a light meal at the airport. During the refreshment, the two leaders talked about the world situation, and the meeting did not end until 1600, having lasted five and a half hours.

Although Zhou and Kosygin did manage to lower the tension, the hawks on both sides were not satisfied. Lin Biao, the Chinese Defence Minister, always a sceptic of the Soviets, sounded cautious. Mao, albeit with less of a phobia of the Soviets than Lin, said that this could be a Soviet smoke screen to lure China into a false sense of security. Therefore, come 1 October, the Chinese national day, and 20th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic, the celebration's theme was still Soviet bashing,



Photo taken at 5 p.m. on 11 August 1969 after the pre-patrol reconnaissance. From the left, kneeling, Li Lianxiang (movie cameraman), fourth from the left (sitting), Li Guozheng, second from right, rear row, Zhang Kezhi, first on right, Cao Xinlong. All were killed on 13 August 1969. (Public domain)



A collage of photos of Nameless Hill/Point 676 as seen in 2022. Note the hill is very rocky, and chipped stones caused many of the injuries sustained by the Chinese. The monument at the base of the slope is a memorial to all the 28 Chinese dead. (Photos courtesy of Zhang Yiming)

and the heroes of Zhenbao Island were the guests of honour of the festivities.

While on the surface, everything looked fine, even agreeing to hold the first border talks in Beijing scheduled for 20 October, in reality, the Chinese were very worried indeed, for they had received intelligence saying that the Soviets were to launch a military strike on China on the same day, and that the talks were a ruse. The intelligence brief also warned that the airplane on which the border talks delegation was to arrive has been converted into a suicide bomber: the plane would be carrying a nuclear bomb. After holding the last politburo meeting, Mao left Beijing on the 14th for Wuhan in central China, and Lin Biao went on the 16th to Suzhou, close to the eastern seaboard in central China, miles from Beijing. Zhou was to stay in Beijing, controlling the central government apparatus, but to take shelter in the nuclear bunker in the western hills. However, on 20 October, there was no invasion; the plane that landed in Beijing from Moscow came with a Soviet delegation for the scheduled border talks. Both sides were still firmly stuck on principles, and no border issues were resolved. The Soviet delegations stood firm on the point that the Sino-Soviet border line was clear and there were no grey areas, whereas the Chinese insisted that borderlines must be realigned. While both sides agreed to disagree, at least there were no further armed skirmishes between the two communist giants.

In hindsight, one can say that the Chinese were overreacting and on the verge of being hysterical concerning the perceived Soviet threat. However, from the reports available, the Soviets did amass a threatening army on the Sino-Soviet border. One week after the Battle of Zhenbao Island,

the Soviet Army Far Eastern Command transferred three motor rifle divisions and one tank division to the Pacific Region Border Force. It seems that someone in Moscow thought the Border Force was still not enough, and later on, another 11 independent tank battalions from the Soviet Army were assigned to the Border Force Order of Battle. In addition to boosting the Border Force, the Soviet Army strengthened its Order of Battle in the area. Two new brigade-size airborne forces, the 13th Independent Airborne Brigade and the 11th Independent Airborne Brigade, both based in the Lake Baikal area, were added to the Order of Battle.

The strengthening of the Soviet Far Eastern Command did not escape the notice of the Americans. In August 1969, the Rand Corporation, an American strategic think tank, published a report that eventually reached then-US president Richard Nixon. It stated the Soviets had, since 1966, steadily built up their armed forces in the Far Eastern area. By 1969, the Soviet military had doubled its strength in the Far East, not just conventional arms but theatre nuclear weapons as well. The Soviets had some 500 SS-12 (NATO name: Scaleboard) nuclear missiles targeting China's north-eastern industrial areas and transport hubs. The Soviets had also massively increased the number of airfields and military installations in the area. In Mongolia, it was reported another 10 new airports had been built, and the number of weather stations along the Sino-Soviet borders had also increased.

The number of military exercises, especially in the Far Eastern Command, had increased dramatically. More troops had been transferred from the Western theatre to the Far East. Since the spring of 1969, the Soviet Far East had been closed to foreign tourists.

If the Americans could see this from across the Pacific, the Chinese being next to the Soviet bear, must have been rattling their bones in fear. One can understand why Mao and Lin Biao acted the way they did. As far as the Chinese were concerned, the actions of their leaders were entirely inferential.

9
EPILOGUE

Why the battle?

One of the first questions readers would ask after reading this or other accounts of the Zhenbao Island battle incident is who started it and why. The first seven chapters of this book outline the incident as far as how Chinese veterans saw their role and experience during these troubled months. From the testaments of Chinese veterans, it is without a doubt that the Zhenbao battle was nothing more than a premeditated ambush to draw the Soviets into a limited war.

There were historical reasons for the 1969 armed clashes, but these reasons were nothing new and were not a problem between the two countries when the Soviet Union gave full diplomatic recognition to the newly established the People's Republic of China. Historical grievances were undoubtedly a factor, but the land border disputes were not just a matter for the People's Republic or Communist China. Looking at historical records, these grievances were already there during the era when the Chinese Nationalists were in power. One of the biggest protests of the Nationalist Chinese was the loss of what is now Mongolia, which was separated from China into an independent but pro-Soviet state. So much so that when the Nationalists were defeated in the Chinese Civil War, or War of Liberation, and escaped to the island of Taiwan – where they remain today – the Nationalist Chinese maintained that the map



Zhenbao Island Self-Defence Memorial Hall in Heilongjiang Province. (Photo courtesy of Zhao Tianzhou (赵天舟))



Entrance to the Zhenbao Island Military Cemetery. (Photo courtesy of Zhao Tianzhou (赵天舟))

of China, according to them, still contained the area of Mongolia as part of Chinese territory. Also, when China was fighting the Japanese during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1941) and Second World War (1941–1945), the USSR supported Uyghur nationalists in their uprising in Xinjiang and set up the Second East Turkestan Republic against Nationalist China. Therefore, territorial disputes between China and the Soviet Union had been a long-standing issue, not just as some modern 'historians' like to portray, as a modern phenomenon.

A second factor one must consider contributing to the armed clash was the overall political atmosphere between the two countries. From 1946 to 1958, the relationship between the USSR and the People's Republic of China was good, in fact, excellent. This can be regarded as the honeymoon period. However, from 1958 to the early 1960s, the Sino-Soviet relationship became increasingly strained, and throughout the 1960s, the relationship went from bad to worse. Although Moscow supported Taiwan as a part of China, the Kremlin was however somewhat lukewarm on Beijing's constant sabre-rattling over its plan to 'liberate' the island. Any war in the Taiwan Strait would undoubtedly bring an American intervention, turning a limited war into a global conflict where the Soviet Union would no doubt get involved. The Chinese bombardment in August 1958 of the Nationalist-held island of Quemoy, just off the coast of Xiamen City, escalated the tensions. The Sino-Soviet relationship went further south when Moscow began cultivating India as a counterbalance over China, which certainly angered Beijing. Beijing felt betrayed as a result.

A third factor, often ignored by analysts, was the lack of chemistry between Mao and Nikita Khrushchev. In fact, it is even safe to say that Mao and Khrushchev disliked each other, both personally and ideologically. The relationship plummeted to such a level that Mao and the CCP even traded personal insults against Khruschev. One factor in how two countries get along is the personal chemistry between their leaders. While Mao and Khrushchev loathed each other, Mao's relationship with Stalin could be described as the friendship between a 'big brother over a little brother.' In this relationship, Stalin was undoubtedly the 'big brother' and Mao, the 'junior brother.' This relationship was sustainable as long as Mao knew his place in the pecking order. Mao tolerated this because he knew that the rise of Communism in China could not be possible without some assistance from Stalin, although he also knew that Stalin extracted a hard bargain on any assistance rendered. Stalin also liked to make sure Mao knew he was the junior partner in this relationship; he kept Mao hanging around for 17 days in Moscow before agreeing to see him. One way or another, Mao owed something to Stalin, and he knew it. Therefore, any pent-up steam the Chinese wished to let loose could only be done after Stalin was dead.

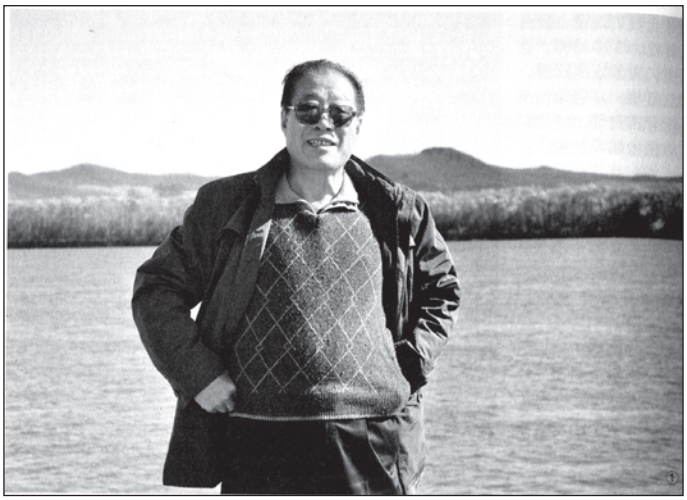
In the discourse over the events of 1969, one must take into account not only historical reasons but, more importantly, the increasingly strained relationship between the two countries. The lack of personal rapport between Mao and Khrushchev did not help mend the increasingly large chasm between the USSR and China. Therefore, to explain the 1969 war as many armchair generals like to do, simply as just a case of the insatiable Chinese greed for ever more land or to recover 'lost' territories, is not only uninformed about the history and the complex politics at the time but more importantly, shows a lack of any fundamental understanding of China. When the border issues were eventually resolved in the first decade of the twenty-first century, resolutions resulted in minor land exchanges. Some resolutions, like that in the Sino-Tajikistan border talks, resulted in a net gain for the Tajiks of 6,678km^2. In contrast, the Sino-Russia border realignment resulted in a 720km^2 gain favouring the Chinese. Territorial concession, for whatever purpose, was not the cause that propelled China to initiate a battle against a much stronger adversary over such an insignificant piece of territory as Zhenbao Island.

If land disputes were not the spark that lit the flame of war between the two communist giants, what other reasons could propel Mao, normally a very calm and calculated man, to initiate such a risky move? The gain must have been huge in order to justify such a high-risk move. What did Mao hope to gain from stirring up the hornet's nest? Without any smoking gun of government archival documents that give a clear-cut explanation, the following proposed answer to why China initiated the 2 March battle can only be a calculated conjecture based on known facts and analysis by learned historians.

The first factor one must consider is the ever-downward spin of the Sino-Soviet relationship and by 1968, jaw-jaw and going to fisticuffs was not a good sign. Some sinologists tried to explain the Zhenbao battle as a means to embarrass the Soviet Union at the



Bas-relief on the side to the Zhenbao Island Military Cemetary. The bottom relief shows how during the Zhenbao Island battle, the local militia provided a vital role as stretcher-bearers and in the provision of logistics. (Courtesy of Zhao Tianzhou (赵天舟))



Sun Yuguo, then the Hejiang Military Sub-District, Gongsi Border Post Commander (Acting) and Deputy Political Officer, as he appeared in 2009. (Public domain)

forthcoming International Meeting of Communist and Workers Parties in Moscow. This was the first international meeting after the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in January and the Zhenbao Island confrontation, making this a perfect opportunity to humiliate the CPSU. However, if, with hindsight in mind, looking at the events of 1969 in the context of history, would it be too much of a risk to take for such a small gain? After all, Mao was risking war with the Soviet Union and even the possibility of a nuclear exchange. Let us look back and examine Mao's character, actions and words. We can be sure that he was not only a great strategist but also a deep thinker who, through his out-of-the-box, ingenious ideas, outsmarted his opponents time and time again. For example, how he made a fool of Chiang Kaishek (蒋介石), the Nationalist leader, during the Long March.[1] Take the four crossings of the River Chi in 1935, an episode during the Long March, as a perfect example of his strategic brilliance. Mao was a deep thinker, and if Mao played chess, he would think 10 steps ahead instead of what ordinary people do, only thinking about the next move and maybe the move after that. It is implausible that Mao would start a battle just to humiliate Khrushchev.

An alternative explanation often discussed was the 'diversionary' conflict theory, wherein leaders create international conflicts to divert public attention from domestic troubles. As China stepped into 1969, the Cultural Revolution had been on the go for two and a half years, and the country was diving head-first into the black hole of disaster. This was an attempt to purge what Mao regarded as remnants of capitalism from Chinese society and re-impose Mao's Thought (known outside China as Maoism). This mass political movement came toe to heel after the failures of a disastrous economic regeneration movement known as the Great Leap Forward, which, in one way or another, caused the Great Chinese Famine (1959–61). Asides from many deaths from unnatural causes, these campaigns caused great economic and cultural damage. It was apparent to many that China was heading for the abyss, and something needed to be done.

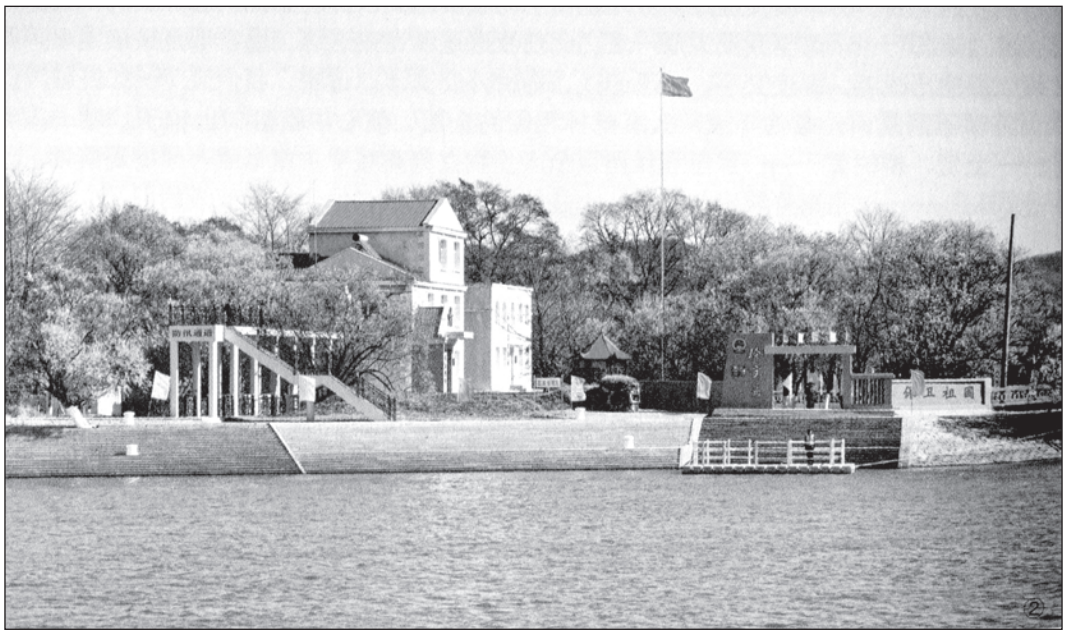
Suppose the 'diversionary' conflict theory was indeed the reason why Mao started the battle of Zhenbao. Did this brief war manage to keep the country away from the ills caused by the Cultural Revolution? If this was indeed the reason, the victory was fleeting. For a very short time, the nation's newspapers did focus entirely on the 'New Tsar.' The country, at least the northern provinces that shared a common border with the Soviet Union, was gearing up for a possible war. If it was to 'distract' the nation, would the preparation for war not be directed so that it covered the entire country? After all, 1969 was the era where the government had 100 percent control of all media channels, and the flames of war could be easily propagated throughout the country. Furthermore, after the initial battle, Mao and the senior leaders were not concerned about fighting an all-out war against the USSR. This explanation does not seem to hold water.

Another school of thought suggested that the Zhenbao incident was created because Mao needed the Cultural Revolution to be brought to a close. If the battle of Zhenbao was a ploy to end the Cultural Revolution, it was a dismal failure, for the Revolution

went from strength to strength until the arrest of the Gang of Four in 1977.[2] It is also highly improbable that to halt a political movement, one has to start a war with a neighbour 10 times your size; it seems highly illogical and unlikely.

What other explanations could elucidate Mao's action if all these hypotheses were wrong?

First, the battle of Zhenbao should be viewed in the overall geopolitical situation of that time. The world was deep in the midst of a cold war, the US-Soviet struggle for global supremacy, the Sino-Soviet split, and the fighting about who would be the top dog in the communist world order. Since the beginning of the 1960s, the Chinese no longer saw the Soviet Union as the 'helpful big brother.' In fact, the USSR had become somewhat troublesome and condescending. The socialist path, as defined by Moscow, was no longer the path China wanted to take, and China was increasingly looking for an alternative. Her economy was in trouble, the country was in chaos, and China wanted a way out. During the Cold War, the world was essentially divided into two camps, the capitalist camp and the communist camp. The capitalist camp, under the leadership of the United States, was increasingly looking like a better option. How could China turn this giant of a ship around by 180 degrees and join a camp that it once spurned as a 'paper tiger'?



Zhenbao Island as it appears today. (Public domain)



The heroes of Zhenbao Island as they appeared in 2009: left to right, Sun Yuguo, Du Yongchun, Hua Yujie and Zhou Dengguo. (Public domain)



After the Zhenbao Island battle, Chinese and Soviet border guards held regular impromptu meetings to resolve differences. (Soviet magazine from 1969)

As the world turned from 1968 to 1969, what was first and foremost on the mind of President Nixon as he entered his first term of office was undoubtedly how he could deliver his election promise of getting the United States out of the quagmire in Vietnam. 1968 was not good for America. There were nationwide riots and assassinations. Internationally, the US-Soviet confrontation was in the most intensive phase. In this context, President Nixon began to toy with the idea of counterbalancing the power of the Soviet Union by luring China to join the United States in the anti-Soviet camp. Getting China on the side of the US would also ease the problem in Vietnam, for China was

one of the main supporters of North Vietnam. It happened that ever since the Sino-Soviet relationship began to sour in the late 1950s, China also perceived a necessity for external allies to counterbalance the Soviet bear. In the mind of the Chinese ran this question: 'How can we send this message to the Americans?' Without knowing it at the time, Nixon was thinking along the same line as Mao.[3] In an article entitled *Asia After Vietnam*, Nixon wrote: 'Taking the long view, we cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations,' giving a clear sign of his thinking, less than 18 months before Mao initiated the battle over Zhenbao Island. Could Mao have picked this message and thus given him the idea to abandon the USSR altogether and embrace the United States? We shall never know, but it is an interesting thought nevertheless.

To most Americans, the logic of the birds of a feather flock together meant democracies of the world would stand together, which was mirrored in the relationships between communist states. In order for the Americans to see that the Chinese Communists were not the same as Soviet Communists – in fact, the Soviets and the Chinese were never friends – was a way to tell the world that the Chinese and the Soviets hated each other. What better way to demonstrate the animosity between China and the USSR than to use the pretext of a souring Sino-Soviet relationship to create an armed clash, a mini-war. A mini-war was a perfect means to kill two birds with one stone, rally the nation against the Russians, and let the Americans realise that China was looking for new 'friends.'

To pick a fight against an opponent that was 10 times your size and better armed seemed a stupid thing to do. But for David to win a fight against Goliath, the best way was to choose the battleground carefully, amass a concentration of troops to give overwhelming local superiority, and then ambush the giant and neutralise the Soviets' advantage, especially in weaponry.

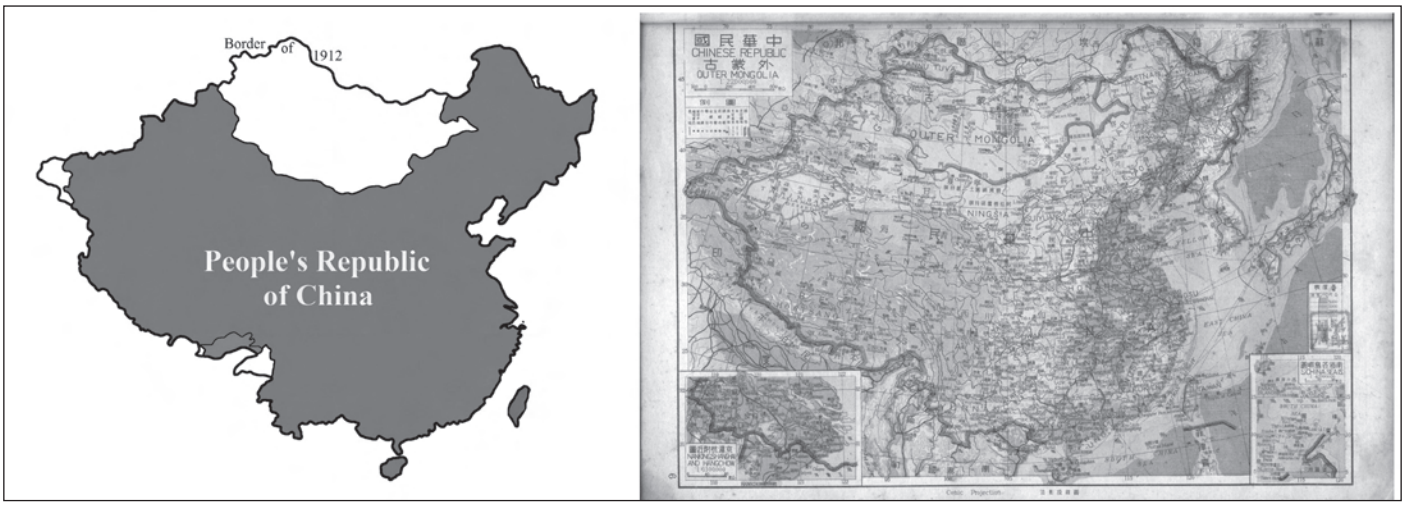
Even the best-laid plans often have unexpected consequences. If Zhenbao Island was an event masterminded by Mao and it managed to tick all the boxes, then Tieliekeli was an act of revenge by the Soviets. This time the Soviets were the ambusher, and the Chinese were the victims. This time the Chinese were caught totally unprepared. The most the Chinese expected was a brief firefight using small arms, so they only went on patrol with infantry small arms. Therefore, when the Soviets came to expel the Chinese, they came with APCs and HMGs, something the Chinese had no appropriate weapons to defend against. Another key point is that judging by the number of journalists on the patrol, as far as the Chinese were concerned, this patrol was purely a PR exercise to get good images for the newsreels.

But as far as the Soviet border guards were concerned, they were just doing their job, and the Chinese patrol crossed over to the barbed wire fence that marked the border between the two countries. However, in the Russian discourse over the incident, the writing often failed to mention that the new border fence that replaced the old fence did not follow the same track as the old fence. Instead of skirting on the western slope around the two hills, known to the Soviets as Kamennaya Hill and Pravaya Hill, it cut a straight line from Border Post 38 to 39. This meant the new border fence was now on the eastern side of the two hills. No one seems to be able to give a satisfactory answer as to why the new fence line did not follow the old line. As far as the Chinese border troops were concerned, no one told them the border had been moved, and therefore they patrolled according to previous practice, which meant following the old fence track.

Who fired first?

From available facts and interviews, the story was clear that the Battle of Zhenbao Island was a trap, an ambush planned and initiated by the Chinese. If this was an ambush, the ambusher usually shoots first. However, in this case, with orders directly from Mao, the headman said explicitly that under no circumstances would the Chinese fire first. Anyone who has served will know orders had to be obeyed, especially those from Mao. The purpose of ensuring that the Chinese did not fire first was based on PR needs, to milk any Sino-Soviet confrontation for propaganda. This message was drummed into all troops, time after time, to ensure every rifleman understood this point. In 2009, a retired army veteran and author, Li Zhanheng (李占恒), together with two other army veterans, interviewed surviving veterans of the Zhenbao Island battle. Sun Yuguo, the former border post commander who led one of the two patrols on the morning of 2 March said:

> At 8 a.m., I, with Sun Qingyu, the Chief-of-Staff of Hejiang Military Sub-District, was in charge of one of the two patrols. In my patrol, all 18 men were border guards. In the other patrol



Left: The present border of the People's Republic of China is much smaller than the border claimed by Republican China in 1912. 1912 was the first year of the newly founded Republic of China. Reclaiming lost territory is often given as the reason why China started the Zhenbao Island battle. However, one can see that the most significant loss of land is to Mongolia, and if any war was to be fought over the 'lost' land, China should have started a war with Mongolia, not the Soviet Union. Right: A Chinese map of the 1920s. Note, Tannu Tuva, then a semi-independent country, was once part of Mongolia, which Republican China still sees as Chinese territory, albeit not under Chinese control. Note also the inset map on the bottom right; showing claims in the South China Seas started not with the current Chinese regime but during the Republican era. (Open source)



Sun Yuguo, the Hero of Zhenbao Island, became an instant media sensation during the Cultural Revolution. While the PLA patrolled in sampans, their Soviet counterparts cruised the Ussuri River in heavily armed motorised patrol boats, illustrating how poorly equipped the PLA was in 1969 when compared to the Soviet Army. Therefore, picking a fight against such a powerful enemy seemed to defy all sensible and logical reasoning. To justify this, what Mao wanted must have been a big prize and not just to humiliate the Soviets in front of the World's Communist Congress. (PLAP 1970)



One of the best-remembered photos from the Zhenbao Island battle shows typical Chinese infantry of the late 1960s. Although lightly armed and equipped, the PLA could be tough and highly tenacious in combat. The sign in the background says: 'Zhenbao Island, Chinese territory must not be violated.' (PLAP 1970)

under Wu Yonggao, 12 men were from the 398th Regiment's reconnaissance troop. Just as we were about to set off, Zhou Dengguo, the 2iC from Wu's patrol, asked, 'Do we make ready?' I asked Wang Jinghua (王景华), the Border Force staff officer, and he replied, 'Yes, of course!' But he added, 'Safety Catch on.' On 2 March, we were ready to hit the Russians, and they were also prepared to fight back; why I said that on that day, the Russians had their rifles across their chest, unlike previous patrols when rifles were slung over their back. On that fateful day, they weren't carrying any sticks like before, and they were wearing helmets, something they had never done before. One more thing, on that day, the Soviets had two patrols instead of the normal one. I dashed forward and shouted my protest, telling the Russians that they were on Chinese territory. The two Soviet patrols began to surround me in a pincer movement. I realised they had taken the bait and immediately withdrew to lure them to the ambush point where 200 of our boys were lying in wait. Just as I got to the embankment, I shouted: 'Be Vigilant, Defend our Motherland!' a signal for the boys to rush out from their ambush point. This must have startled the Russians, and they fired.

'But wait', said Li; 'Can you tell me who fired first?'

Sun continued:

We had been given strict orders not to fire first. That day, some 70-plus Russians came, but we had some 200 boys on our side. On that day, every Chinese soldier had two weapons, one large stick and one rifle. The orders were to respond appropriately; if the Soviets use sticks, we used sticks to respond. When the ambush was sprung, the boys had sticks in their hands, and even before the sticks were lifted above our heads, ready to strike the Soviets, in came the bullets. Six of our boys went down; two of them, whom I know well, Liu Wenxue (刘文学) and Wang Kean (王克安), were seriously injured. Both survived, and Liu lives in Liaoning and Wang in Hengshui. I was there; I was an eyewitness.

On 2011, just before the mid-Autumn festival, Li also interviewed Wu Yonggao. Wu was 70, healthy, and could still walk at a feisty pace. Wu said:

I was the commander of one of the two patrols on that fateful 2 March. Sun Yuguo was the patrol commander of the other team. When we got to the mid-point of the Ussuri River, we were confronted by two APCs, one army truck, and one jeep. They stopped about 70m from me, and they de-bused. They then divided into three groups, one group of some 20 men headed straight toward me, and one of some 10-ish men cut across and seemed to be heading toward Sun's group. The final group of seven was cutting across my front. One of them was Lieutenant Strelinkov. Three of the seven carried their assault rifles by the sling, but unlike the rest, they did not have their magazine attached. My experience told me they were the command group and intended to use their rifles as clubs.' As Strelinkov approached me, I shouted: 'This is Chinese territory; you have crossed the border' Strelinkov ignored my protest, lunged toward me, and grabbed my rifle sling across my chest. I grabbed the lapel of his leather coat with my left hand and struck him with my right.

> He then staggered back, giving me a shocked look that I still remember vividly. Just at this moment, there was a gunshot. We were both surprised. A gunshot was the signal for us to open fire, and this came from Sun's patrol. The boys in the ambush group, some 11 of them, had 10 assault rifles, and one semi-automatic rifle [and] spat out deadly red-hot lead to the seven Russians.

The confusion as to who fired first can be explained because much of the discussions and analysis made in the immediate years after the 1969 incidents tended to see the event in isolation and not take a bird-eye view of the entire situation. As far as the patrolmen from Strelinkov's group were concerned, the Chinese did open fire first, but they were reacting to the gunfire from Sun's patrol. According to Sun, it was the Soviets who fired first because they were startled by the ambushing Chinese. But having said that, the Chinese were not all innocent in this. The Soviet patrolmen were surprised by a large group of ambushers suddenly leaping forward, yelling and screaming in a hostile manner. Under these circumstances, the only reaction was to use your instinct and defend yourself with whatever was at hand: in this case, a loaded AK-47. Yes, the Soviets most probably did fire first, but they were made to, or tricked into firing.

Consequences

The Battle of Zhenbao Island showed Nixon that China could indeed be turned. After the Zhenbao Island and Tieleketi escapade, the Sino-US relationship thaw began to show signs of spring. The thaw was coming. As to reinforce the signal, Edgar Snow, the pro-China journalist, the first Westerner to gain an interview with Mao back in 1936, was invited back to Beijing in 1970 and was allowed to stand next to Mao as he presided over the national day parade. Snow was later called to meet with Mao, where Mao told Snow that he would welcome Richard Nixon to China either as a tourist or in his official capacity as President of the United States. Finally, a definite crack in the bamboo curtain. Next was the famous Ping-Pong diplomacy. On 10 April 1971, nine American players, four officials, and two spouses stepped across a bridge from Hong Kong to the Chinese mainland and then spent their time during 11–17 April playing fun matches, touring the Great Wall and Summer Palace, and watching a ballet. As a result of the easing of tension between the two adversaries, just two months later, the United States lifted the trade embargo against China. One month later, Dr. Henry Kissinger made a secret visit to China, paving the way for a sitting US president to visit China for the first time. It could be said that the rest is history.

If the purpose of Zhenbao Island was to turn China away from the USSR and embrace the United States, it succeeded beyond Mao's wildest dream. Just three years later, President Richard Nixon stepped off Airforce One at Beijing Airport to be greeted by Prime Minister Zhou Enlai. In 1979 the two countries established full diplomatic relations. This is, and should be, the legacy of the Battle of Zhenbao Island.

If the Chinese were able to come out of this battle with a winning hand, the Soviets got the short straw. Looking from the Soviet perspective, their inability to resolve the border question with the Chinese, their intransigence over the question that they were 'right,' and there was nothing to discuss meant that throughout the remaining years of the Soviet Union, the Sino-Soviet relationship remained tense. To safeguard against the Chinese, the Soviets were forced to station a sizeable military force in the Far East. Just before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, in the Far East area, the Soviets placed eight combined arms armies (including 40th Combined Arms Army, which was deployed in Afghanistan), seven army corps, 51 motor rifle divisions, seven tank divisions, one airborne division, three motor rifle brigades, totalling some one million men, 14,900 tanks, 1,125 aircraft, and 1,000 helicopters.

Eduard Shevardnadze, the last minister of foreign affairs of the Soviet Union, said just before the dissolution of the Soviet Union that one of the greatest strategic mistakes of the former leaders of the Soviet Union was that the country had to face a two-front confrontation, one against the West and one against China. To defend against the West, mainly America, the Soviet Union spent 1,000,000,000,000 (or one trillion) Rubles (at that time, 1 Ruble = 1.1 US$); and to defend against the Chinese, the country had to spend another 3,000,000,000 (three billion) Rubles. This placed tremendous pressure on the country's economy and, one way or another, contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this grand strategic contest between great states, the winner was undoubtedly the West. The United States used the competition between the two communist giants as perfect leverage to defeat what Ronald Reagan called the 'evil empire.' The result was that the Soviet Union not only lost the Cold War to the West but ensured that Russia and the former Soviet states also lost the race for national development.

Afterthought

In 1969, Mao expected that this carefully planned and accepted short battle would initiate a strategic turnaround for China. Little did he know how even the most carefully laid plans would turn astray. By the end of the year, China and the Soviet Union were sleepwalking to a nuclear Armageddon. The tenacity of those level-headed doves of both camps only held back the horsemen of the apocalypse. China and the Soviet Union, or its successors after the dissolution of the USSR, had been negotiating on the subject of how the two nations should be demarcated for 40 years. These talks can be divided into three phases. The first, from February to August of 1964, yielded little and ended because of the rapid deterioration of the relationship between the two countries. The second round of talks that began in October 1969 made little headway. Both sides were just treading the same water, but at least it was not war, and no one died because of any disagreement. The third round of talks that began in February 1987 was the most productive of all the previous meetings. The first break in the ice occurred when in September 1976, Mao died, and in 1978 saw the rise of Deng Xiaoping (邓小平), who brought China out of an economic and political conundrum with a series of pro-market economic reforms. With China no longer locked in political dogma, espousing the anti-revisionist notion of the antagonistic contradiction between classes, China's international relations gradually began to be normalised. The second part of the puzzle that fell into place was when in January 1987, Mikhail Gorbachev, then the General-Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, initiated perestroika. This domestic policy change also relaxed the hardline style the Soviet Union had previously adopted in their overseas dealings. The relaxed attitude of the Soviets allowed rapid headway to be made such that when, in May 1991, then President of China, Jiang Zemin (江泽民) made a state visit to the USSR, the two countries, could, at last, sign a treaty, *The 1991 Sino-Soviet Border Agreement* to resolve most of the border disputes between the two states. The treaty resulted in some minor territorial changes along the border.

As far as the Ussuri River was concerned, the river where Zhanbao Island lies; of the 320 islands on the Ussuri River, the agreement recognised 167 islands as Russian and 153 islands as Chinese. After the battle, Zhenbao Island was in de facto Chinese control: the agreement recognised China's de jure as well as de facto control.

Six months after Jiang Zemin visited the USSR, on 26 December 1991, the Soviet Union was no more, and overnight, the border negotiation changed from one-to-one to one-to-four talks. China had to hold separate talks with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Come March 1992, Russia implemented the eastern section of the *1991 Sino-Soviet Border Agreement*. Both parties established 10 land and a further five water survey groups to ascertain detailed demarcation. On the 4,200km borderline, Russia and China planted 1,190 border posts, clearly defining the exact line between the two nations. On 3 September 1994, the two countries signed another agreement to delimitate the western section of the Sino-Russia borderline.

When Kazakhstan became an independent country, there was some 2,420km^2 of land still in contention with China. A border treaty between the two nations was signed in Almaty on 26 April 1994 and ratified by the Kazakh president on 15 June 1995. China received around 22 percent of the disputed land, and Kazakhstan received the remaining 78 percent. In July 2001, Kazakhstan and China finally signed off the 1,782.75km borderline between the two nations. The successful delimitation of the entire land border between the former Soviet Union and China created goodwill between the five former members of the USSR,[4] such that in 2001 formed a transcontinental political, economic, security, and military alliance known as The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The disputed land around Tielieketi was returned to China. In commemorating the 28 dead from the battle that occurred in August 1969, in May 2008 China erected a plinth on the nameless high ground (known as Kamennaya Hill in Russian literature). The nameless hill is now known as the Hill of Bravery and Devotion or Zhongyong Shan in Chinese.

At the invitation of President Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) of China, President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin of the Russian Federation paid a state visit to China from 14 to 16 October 2004, signing an agreement on the very last bit of the unresolved border between the two nations. Russia would return Yinlong Island (Tarabarov Island) and half of Heixiazi Island (Bolshoi Ussuriysky Island) to China under *The Supplementary Agreement between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation on the Eastern Section of the Sino-Russian Border*, marking the complete delimitation of the 4,300km borderline between Russia and China, thus finally ending a 300-year dispute.

One immediate upside of resolving this lengthy dispute was that the official relationship between the two countries dramatically improved. Trade multiplied nearly sixfold during Putin's first presidency; the two countries even held the first-ever Sino-Russian joint military exercises in August 2005. If the Soviet Union could have ended her animosity against the Chinese earlier, aside from saving on military expenditure, she could have gained much from trade too. Could this have forestalled the collapse of the Soviet Union? Certainly, an interesting proposition for political scientists to ponder.

As writing of this book is concluded,[5] the war between Russia and Ukraine has been running for nearly seven months. Aside from the many problems it has caused, one thing for sure is that China and Russia have gotten closer. The reason is simple, America, with Western Europe in tow, is lining up the crosshair on the heart of Russia. Since Trump came to power, China-bashing has been a favourite sport of America, Europe, and Australia. This has continued despite the new administration of Joe Biden. This has unwillingly pushed China and Russia together; *if my enemy is also your enemy, then we should be friends, if not partners*. In a matter of just a few months, US President Joe Biden undid the great strategic masterstroke of the twentieth century. Nixon's trip to China was described as 'The week that changed the world,' and this change was undoubtedly for the better. Only history will tell us what this Sino-Russia realignment will bring to the world.



Leng Pengfei, Combat Hero of the Battle of Zhenbao Island, was awarded the prodigious '8-1' (1st August – foundation day of the PLA) medal in 2017. Although retired, Leng wore his major general's uniform to receive the medal from President Xi Jinping (习近平). (Public domain)

A war over from over 50 years ago could also have implications for the modern world; it is just a matter of how one chooses to read it.

Postscript

As I was tidying up the Ps and Qs of this manuscript, the news broke that Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Union, had died at the grand age of 91. In the West, he was chiefly remembered as the man who ended the Cold War; however, outside Europe, the memory of Gorbachev was not always positive. Among the many commentaries on Chinese social media, one post provokes memories from 1969:

> There is one point I really don't understand. When the Soviet Union was powerful, amassing an army, million strong along the Sino-Soviet border, on this side of the fence, we were on high alert. The whole country was busy digging air raid shelters; posters were everywhere telling citizens how to survive a nuclear attack. Those were undoubtedly not days were wanted to relive. Much later, the Soviet Union collapsed, and we on this side grew rich and lives were better; why do so many seem to hate Gorby, and some are even nostalgic for the old Soviet Union. What's wrong with these people? Is a powerful Soviet better than a rich and increasingly powerful China?

One comment on this post:

> Ask yourself, why does the Soviet want to threaten China with a nuclear attack? Who put a stop to this atomic blackmail? Why did the 'old man' (Mao) pull out all stops to try to contact an enemy with whom we had no diplomatic relationship?

For many, the Cold War ended with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. But when did this first crack appear? I would say that the first

crack that led to the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union started in March 1969, and Mao should also be remembered for having a hand in ending the Cold War.

APPENDIX I

LIST OF CHINESE DEAD BURIED AT ZHENBAO ISLAND WAR CEMETERY

	Name	Enlistment Date	Unit	Post	Awards	KIA Date
1	Wang Qingrong 王庆容	March 1959	1 Company, 217th Regiment	Company 2iC	1st Class Citation Combat Hero	2 March 1969
2	Li Canrong 李灿荣	March 1966	1 Company, 217th Regiment	Section Commander	1st Class Citation	2 March 1969
3	Duo Jinrong 多金荣	March 1966	1 Company, 217th Regiment	Rifleman	1st Class Citation	2 March 1969
4	Wen Dengjin 文登金	April 1968	1 Company, 217th Regiment	Rifleman	2nd Class Citation	2 March 1969
5	Xiang Zhicheng 向志成	April 1968	1 Company, 217th Regiment	Rifleman	2nd Class Citation	2 March 1969
6	Zhou Guoshu 周国树	March 1964	1 Company, 217th Regiment	Rifleman	2nd Class Citation	2 March 1969
7	Shen Yuping 沈玉平	April 1968	1 Company, 217th Regiment	Rifleman	2nd Class Citation	2 March 1969
8	Mei Yunxuan 梅运轩	March 1964	3 Company, 217th Regiment	Section 2iC	2nd Class Citation	2 March 1969
9	Li Zhongrong 李忠荣	March 1965	3 Company, 217th Regiment	Section 2iC	3rd Class Citation	2 March 1969
10	Chen Shaoguang 陈绍光	March 1959	Reconnaissance Company, 133rd Division	Company 2iC	1st Class Citation Combat Hero	2 March 1969
11	Yang Wenbin 杨文斌	March 1965	Reconnaissance Company, 133rd Division	Section 2iC	2nd Class Citation	2 March 1969
12	Li Hongben 李洪本	September 1964	Reconnaissance Company, 133rd Division	Rifleman	2nd Class Citation	2 March 1969
13	Chen Mingduo 陈明多	March 1965	Reconnaissance Company, 133rd Division	Section Commander	2nd Class Citation	2 March 1969
14	Yu Qingyang 于庆阳	March 1963	Reconnaissance Company, 397th Regiment	Rifleman	1st Class Citation Combat Hero	2 March 1969
15	Chen Lijian 陈立剑	August 1964	Reconnaissance Company, 397th Regiment	Section Commander	2nd Class Citation	2 March 1969
16	Wang Shangui 王善贵	September 1964	Reconnaissance Company, 398th Regiment	Section 2iC	2nd Class Citation	2 March 1969
17	Yang Shunguo 杨顺国	March 1965	Reconnaissance Company, 398th Regiment	Rifleman	3rd Class Citation	2 March 1969
18	Guo Zhongyi 郭忠义	March 1966	Reconnaissance Company, 398th Regiment	Rifleman	3rd Class Citation	2 March 1969

	Name (*continued*)	**Enlistment Date**	**Unit**	**Post**	**Awards**	**KIA Date**
19	Lu Yuanyang 陆远洋	March 1964	Reconnaissance Company, 399th Regiment	Section 2iC	2nd Class Citation	2 March 1969
20	Chen Jingli 陈景立	August 1966	Raohe Border Post	Rifleman		2 March 1969
21	Wang Zhiyou 王志有	March 1965	20th Regiment, 7th Division	Section Commander		14 March 1969
22	Lv Wenhui 吕文辉	March 1968	20th Regiment, 7th Division	Rifleman		14 March 1969
23	Chen Yongcai 陈永才	April 1968	1 Company, 217th Regiment	Rifleman	3rd Class Citation	15 March 1969
24	Li Shanglie 李尚烈	April 1968	1 Company, 217th Regiment	Rifleman	3rd Class Citation	15 March 1969
25	Yao Pilu 姚丕录	March 1966	3 Company, 217th Regiment	Rifleman	3rd Class Citation	15 March 1969
26	Xiang Yili 向以礼	March 1966	3 Company, 217th Regiment	Rifleman	3rd Class Citation	15 March 1969
27	Yuan Qifa 袁启发	March 1964	1 Battery, 201st Regiment	Rifleman	2nd Class Citation	15 March 1969
28	Zhu Chaoyu 朱朝玉	March 1966	1 Battery, 201st Regiment	Section Commander	3rd Class Citation	15 March 1969
29	Tang Ruda 汤汝达	March 1959	1 Battery, 201st Regiment	Platoon Commander	1st Class Citation	15 March 1969
30	Li Fengxiang 李凤祥	March 1965	1 Battery, 201st Regiment	Rifleman	3rd Class Citation	15 March 1969
31	Yang Lin 杨林	August 1962	3 Battery, 201st Regiment	Section Commander	1st Class Citation Combat Hero	15 March 1969
32	Zhang Zhenwan 张振万	March 1965	3 Battery, 201st Regiment	Rifleman	3rd Class Citation	15 March 1969
33	Wu Wenjun 吴文俊	March 1965	3 Battery, 201st Regiment	Section 2iC	3rd Class Citation	15 March 1969
34	Zheng Daoxun 郑道训	September 1964	Reconnaissance Company, 398th Regiment	Section 2iC	3rd Class Citation	15 March 1969
35	Zhao Shitou 赵石头	March 1966	3 Battery, 201st Regiment	Section Commander	2nd Class Citation	17 March 1969
36	An Baofeng 安保丰	March 1968	75mm Battery, 201st Regiment	Section 2iC	1st Class Citation	17 March 1969
37	Tang Zhengzhi 唐正志	March 1964	1 Company, 201st Regiment	Section 2iC	3rd Class Citation	18 March 1969
38	Tan Zuwan 谭祖万	March 1964	1 Company, 201st Regiment	Rifleman	2nd Class Citation	18 March 1969
39	Sun Zhengmin 孙征民	1951	2nd Military Industrial Zone, Military Region	Deputy Director	1st Class Citation Combat Hero	20 March 1969
40	Dong Shuhuan 董书环	March 1963	3 Company, 217th Regiment	Platoon Commander	3rd Class Citation	24 March 1969
41	Chen Zhongjun 陈仲君	April 1968	3 Company, 217th Regiment	Rifleman	3rd Class Citation	24 March 1969
42	Zhang Yinhua 张印华	August 1961	3 Company, 217th Regiment	Platoon Commander	1st Class Citation	24 March 1969
43	Gao Weihan 高维翰	March 1968	143rd Regiment, 48th Division	Rifleman	3rd Class Citation	26 March 1969
44	Jia Junyang 贾俊阳	March 1965	1 Company, 201st Regiment	Squad Commander	2nd Class Citation	3 April 1969

	Name (*continued*)	**Enlistment Date**	**Unit**	**Post**	**Awards**	**KIA Date**
45	Chen Junru 陈俊儒	March 1965	3 Company, 217th Regiment	Bugler		7 April 1969
46	Dong Mingchun 董明春	September 1964	Reconnaissance Company, 399th Regiment	Squad Commander	2nd Class Citation	12 April 1969
47	Zhang Rongkuan 张荣宽	April 1968	3 Company, 217th Regiment	Rifleman		15 April 1969
48	Fu Renyun 傅仁源	March 1969	67th Division, Pioneer Company	Rifleman		21 April 1969
49	Chen Qiying 陈其英	March 1968	Reconnaissance Company, 201st Regiment	Rifleman	3rd Class Citation	9 May 1969
50	Zhang Guoqing 张国卿	March 1965	Changfa Border Post	Chief Quartermaster		25 May 1969
51	Li Xicai 李喜财	March 1966	9 Company, 201st Regiment	Squad 2iC		7 June 1969
52	Li Yongfa 李永发	March 1966	11th Regiment	Rifleman		16 June 1969
53	Liu Naide 刘乃德	March 1969	11th Regiment	Rifleman		16 June 1969
54	Liu Tingyu 刘廷宇	March 1965	1 Battery, 201st Regiment	Rifleman		16 August 1969
55	Song Mengkang 宋萌康	March 1968	116th Division, 39 Corps	Squad Commander		23 September 1969
56	Wu Yongqing 邬永清	April 1968	Reconnaissance Company, 200th Regiment	Rifleman		27 November 1969
57	Li Fuchun 李福春	April 1968	3rd Battalion, 200th Regiment	Signaller		27 November 1969
58	Lin Dongfa 林东法	March 1966	9 Company, 199th Regiment	Squad Commander		19 April 1970
59	Zhang Shuquan 张书泉	March 1970	1 MG Company, 200th Regiment	MG Gunner		30 May 1970
60	Li Zhenqing 李振清	March 1966	5 Company, 200th Regiment	Squad Commander		3 July 1970
61	Song Zhanyuan 宋占元	April 1968	8 Company, 200th Regiment	Rifleman		4 July 1970
62	Lu Zhongwen 卢忠文	March 1971	2 Company, 200th Regiment	Rifleman		2 April 1971
63	Huang Wencheng 黄文成	March 1968	3rd Border Regiment	Squad Commander		7 June 1971
64	Gao Mingyuan 高明元	March 1969	3rd Border Regiment	Squad 2iC		7 June 1971
65	Liang Dianqi 梁殿启	March 1971	3rd Border Regiment	Rifleman		7 June 1971
66	Chen Guohua 陈国华	April 1969	3rd Border Regiment	Squad Commander		21 June 1971
67	Ren Dongsheng 任东胜	March 1969	1 Company, 199th Regiment	Squad 2iC		27 April 1972
68	Liu Keqin 刘克勤	Jan 1971	413th Regiment (Artillery)	Gunner		21 June 1972

APPENDIX II

AWARDS TO INDIVIDUALS AND UNITS MADE BY SHENYANG MILITARY REGION TO ALL THOSE INVOLVED IN THE BATTLE OF ZHENBAO ISLAND

A total of 37 units and organisations and 376 individuals were honoured with awards for deeds and bravery during the Battle of Zhenbao Island. Of those awards given to units and organisations, 17 received First Class Citations, six received Second Class Citations, and 14 received Third Class Citations. Of the individuals, 24 were given the top honours; 86, the second award and 266, the third level honours.

First Class Citations Awarded to Military Units

133rd Division, Reconnaissance Company
133rd Division, 398th Regiment, Reconnaissance Platoon
133rd Division, 397th Regiment, Reconnaissance Company, 4 Section
67th Division, 201st Regiment, 3 Battery, 7 Troop
67th Division, 201st Regiment, 3 Battery, 8 Troop
73rd Division, 217th Regiment, 1 Battery, 75mm Gun Troop
413th Regiment, 5 Battery, 6 Troop
413th Regiment, 5 Battery, 4 Troop
Gongsi Border Post
73rd Division, 217th Regiment, 1 Company
73rd Division, 217th Regiment, 1 Company, 1 Platoon
73rd Division, 217th Regiment, 3 Company, 2 Platoon
73rd Division, 217th Regiment, 3 Company, 2 Platoon, 5 Section
133rd Division, 397th Regiment, Reconnaissance Platoon
73rd Division, 217th Regiment, 3 Company, AT Section
73rd Division, 217th Regiment, 1 Company, AT Section
67th Division, 201st Regiment, 3 Battery, 3 Troop

First Class Citations Awarded to Individuals

Sun Zhengmin 孙征民	2nd Military Industrial Zone Engineer, Military Affairs Deputy Director
Yang Lin 杨林	67th Division, 201st Regiment, 3 Battery, 7 Troop, Troop Commander
Wang Qingrong 王庆荣	73rd Division, 217th Regiment, 1 Company, Company 2iC
Zhang Yinhua 张印华	73rd Division, 217th Regiment, 3 Company, 2 Platoon, Platoon Commander
Li Canrong 李灿荣	73rd Division, 217th Regiment, 3 Company, MG Section, Section Commander
Duo Jinrong 多金荣	73rd Division, 217th Regiment, 1 Company, Rifleman
Chen Shaoguang 陈绍光	133rd Division, Reconnaissance Company, Company 2iC
Yu Qingyang 于庆阳	133rd Division, 387th Regiment, Reconnaissance Platoon, 5 Section, Rifleman
Sun Yuguo 孙玉国	Hejiang Military Sub-District Border Post (Acting) Commander
Du Yongchun 杜永春	133rd Division, Political Affairs, Clerk
Zhou Dengguo 周登国	133rd Division, 398th Regiment, Reconnaissance Company, 3 Section, Section Commander
Hu Heren 胡贺仁	133rd Division, Reconnaissance Company, Rifleman
Yu Hongdong 于洪东	133rd Division, 397th Regiment, Reconnaissance Platoon, Platoon Commander

Leng Pengfei 冷鹏飞	73rd Division, 217th Regiment, 1 Battalion, Battalion Commander
Zhao Yongzhi 赵永志	73rd Division, 217th Regiment, 1 Company, Company 2iC
Li Dezhong 李德忠	67th Division, 201st Regiment, 3 Battery, Troop Commander
Hua Yujie 华玉杰	73rd Division, 217th Regiment, 3 Company, AT Section, AT gunner
Fu Wende 傅文德	67th Division, 201st Regiment, 3 Battery, Gunner
Tang Ruda 汤汝达	67th Division, 201st Regiment, 1 Battery, Troop Commander
An Baofeng 安保丰	67th Division, 201st Regiment, RCL AT Company, Section 2iC
Li Changliang 李昌良	67th Division, 201st Regiment, Reconnaissance Company, 5 Section, Section Commander
Zhu Zengkun 朱增坤	67th Division, 201st Regiment, Reconnaissance Company, 4 Section, Section Commander
Liu Chunyi 柳春义	67th Division, 201st Regiment, Reconnaissance Company, 4 Section, Rifleman
Tong Zuoliang 佟佐良	Hejiang Military Sub-District, Guard Section, Section Commander

APPENDIX 3

LIST OF CHINESE WHO DIED AT THE BATTLE OF TIELIEKETI, 13 AUGUST 1969

	Name	Month of Birth	Enlistment Date	Post and Remarks	Buried at
1	Pei Yingzhang 裴映章	May 1932	April 1951	Patrol commander, Korean War veteran, officer	Xinjiang Tuoli
2	Fan Jinzhong 范进忠	April 1939	March 1958	Reserve party commander, officer	Xinjiang Tacheng
3	Li Lianxian 李连祥	May 1935	May 1956	Patrol member, PLA war cinema photographer, 8.1 Movie Studio photographer, Vietnam War veteran	Xinjiang Tuoli
4	Wang Yibing 王一兵	August 1939	1965 (Joined Xinhua News Agency)	Central covering, Central party, Xinhua News Agency photographer, civilian	Xinjiang Tuoli
5	Wen Binglin 温炳林	May 1943	August 1961	Central covering, central party, CCTV journalist (military)	Xinjiang Tuoli
6	Yang Zhenlin 杨振林	June 1944	August 1962	Central covering, right party	Xinjiang Tuoli
7	Wang Mingyuan 王明远	January 1936	October 1962	Reserve party	Xinjiang Tacheng
8	Li Guozhen 李国贞	January 1947	August 1964	Patrol member, officer	Xinjiang Tuoli
9	Gao Chunling 高春苓	March 1945	August 1961	Patrol member, officer	Xinjiang Tuoli
10	Guo Yufeng 郭玉峰	June 1946	August 1964	Reserve party, officer	Xinjiang Tacheng

	Name (*continued*)	**Month of Birth**	**Enlistment Date**	**Post and Remarks**	**Buried at**
11	Liu Yunzeng 刘允增	April 1945	August 1964	Patrol member	Xinjiang Tuoli
12	Fan Zhongxuan 樊中宣	February 1947	November 1965	Patrol member	Xinjiang Tuoli
13	Cao Xinlong 曹新龙	December 1948	November 1965	Patrol signaller	Xinjiang Tuoli
14	Li Guichang 李贵昌	May 1949	February 1968	Patrol member	Xinjiang Tuoli
15	Jing Changxiong 景长雄	April 1950	February 1968	Patrol member	Xinjiang Tuoli
16	Zhang Kezhi 张克志	May 1948	March 1969	Patrol member	Xinjiang Tuoli
17	Li Ruizeng 李瑞增	June 1950	March 1969	Patrol member	Xinjiang Tuoli
18	Li Jian 李建	May 1945	November 1965	Central covering, central party commander	Xinjiang Tuoli
19	Yu Changan 余长安	October 1945	November 1965	Central covering, central party	Xinjiang Tuoli
20	Zhang Jili 张积礼	January 1950	February 1968	Central covering, central party	Xinjiang Tuoli
21	Liu Yixin 刘遗新	July 1950	March 1969	Central covering, central party	Xinjiang Tuoli
22	Wang Chengzhen 王承贞	December 1951	March 1969	Central covering, central party	Xinjiang Tuoli
23	Yin Qingqi 尹清启	November 1950	March 1969	Central covering, central party grenadier No 2	Xinjiang Tuoli
24	Yang Shihuai 杨世怀	May 1949	March 1969	Central covering, central party	Xinjiang Tuoli
25	He Zongyi 贺宗义	November 1949	March 1969	Central covering, central party	Xinjiang Tuoli
26	Ding Xinian 丁西年	February 1946	February 1968	Central covering, right party	Xinjiang Tuoli
27	Wang Yongren 王永仁	July 1951	March 1969	Central covering, right party	Xinjiang Tuoli
28	Yuan Guozhen 袁国振	March 1948	March 1969	Reserve party	Xinjiang Tuoli

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Yuan from the Tielieketi Battle is back! (铁列克提铁事之小袁归来) (in Chinese), online article, 12 May 2010

NOTES

Preface

1 Key clashes: 1) From 1967 to 1968, Qiliqin Island (七里沁岛, Kirkinsky Island); 2) Bacha Island (八岔岛, Goldinsky Island, 8 July 1969); 3) Sun Longzhen Incident (孙龙珍事件, 10 June 1969); 4) Tielieketi Incident (Lake Zhalanashkol, 13 August 1969).

Chapter 1

1 China claimed loss of 400,000 square kilometres.
2 China claimed loss of 70,000 square kilometres.
3 The modern name of this county-level city is Tacheng 塔城, an abbreviation of "Tarbaghatay City". The current Uyghur name is Qöqäk transliterated from Mongolian name as Qoqak.
4 中俄塔尔巴哈西南界约 (Sino-Russian Protocol governing SW of Chuguchak) or Протокол об изменении границы между Россией и Китаем на участке от горы Мус-тау до реки Ак-Каба (*Protocol on changing the border between Russia and China in the section from Altai Mountain in the north to Saur Mountain in the south).*
5 The actual name of Treaty of Aigun reads: *Aigun Treaty of Friendship and Boundaries*. To the Chinese, who loss the lands almost to the size of France, this treaty was not really very friendly!
6 His Russian name was Nikolai Vladimirovich Elizarov (Николай Владимирович Елизаров).
7 The first lady of Republic of China was better known as Chiang Fang-liang but her real name was Faina Ipatievna Vakhreva (Фаина Ипатьевна Вахрева,1916-2004, born in Yekaterinburg).
8 In the eyes of the Chinese, this represented a loss of 1.44 million square kilometres.
9 For most of the first 50 years of the twentieth century, China was under semi-colonial rule by Western nations and the Japanese.
10 Quoted in: Eugene Lawson, *Sino-Vietnamese Conflict* (New York: Praeger, 1984), pp. 159.
11 5-4-1 being 50 percent time on political education, 40 percent on military training, 10 percent on administrative matters.

Chapter 2

1 See *Operation Danube* in Helion's Europe@War series.
2 The area where the incident occurred borders with Kyrgyzstan.
3 Also written as 'Chi Li Chin Island' in some literature.
4 They were from 859 Farm (Formerly 31st Regiment PLA, now converted to Production and Construction unit, with fishery as the focus of their work): Gao Linqin (高林勤), Peng Fuwang (彭福旺), Cai Youxiang (蔡友相), Zhang Xinru(张信儒). A total of 45 suffered serious injury and 20 were also injured albeit not seriously. One of the seriously injured subsequently died.
5 Equivalent to NATO G2 – colonel.
6 Li was a Korean.

Chapter 3

1 Former name: Kiamusze

Chapter 4

-

Chapter 5

1 L.M. Mlechin, *Brezhnev. M.: Young Guard* (A series of "great people") ISBN 978-5-235-03114-2 (in Russian).
2 Qiao Guanhua was later appointed the first People's Republic of China Ambassador to the UN.
3 In fact, this method is also popular within the British Army, especially within the Special Forces community.

Chapter 6

1 A map and Army ID card later recovered from Colonel Leonov's body was stained with blood, penetrated with a single bullet hole. These documents were stuffed in his top left-hand pocket.

Chapter 7

-

Chapter 8

1 The Model 71 manpack radio is a 2W developed by Nanjing Radio Factory (714 Factory), for used at regiment, battalion and company level communication. It can be used to send morse and AM voice communication. The working frequency is 2–7MHz. The radio is large 41.6 x 19.5 x 31.5cm in size and weighs 16kg. A 2.4m radial lobe whip antenna (five lobe antenna) can give 40–55km range for morse, 10–22km range for voice calls.

Chapter 9

1 Benjamin Lai, *The Long March 1934–35: The rise of Mao and the beginning of modern China* (Oxford, Osprey Publishing: 2019).
2 A Maoist political faction that came to prominence during the Cultural Revolution. The Gang wrestled some power of state in the later stages of the Cultural Revolution, when Mao became increasing senile. It can be described as an attempted coup, to gain power in a post-Mao era.

3 Richard M Nixon, 'Asia After Vietnam', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (October 1967), pp. 111–125.
4 Founding members were: China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.
5 1 September 2022, Shanghai.

Bibliography

1 White Mountain and Blackwater is the nickname for the University of North-East China, its logo designed in 1929, its monochrome form has white hills and a black river.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Benjamin Lai 黎建熙, Chinese but educated in the UK, was one of the few ethnic Chinese who earned a commission in the British Territorial Army. During his service, he spent time guarding the Anglo-Spanish border at Gibraltar and the Sino-Hong Kong border before 1997, and thus has hands-on experience in frontier protection. Since taking leave of full-time employment, Benjamin has authored eight books, all available on Amazon.com. This book is his first with Helion. Today, Benjamin spends his time between London, Shanghai, and Hong Kong.

Zhang Yiming 张一鸣, when not writing books and articles, mainly in the military and history genre, works in a bank. This cooperation with Benjamin Lai is his first venture into publishing outside China. Zhang Yiming resides in Shanghai, China, with his wife and daughter.



This classic photograph taken in 1969 shows two border guards of the People's Liberation Army. They wear the field uniform with soft cap, and carry the Type 56 Assault Rifle, a Chinese copy of the Soviet AK-47, chambered for the same 7.62x39mm (M-1943) round. They also each wear a chest rig for three 30-round magazines, often referred to in the West as the 'Chicom' rig. Note that the soldier closest to the camera has a fixed bladed (as opposed to spike) bayonet. (PLAP 1969)



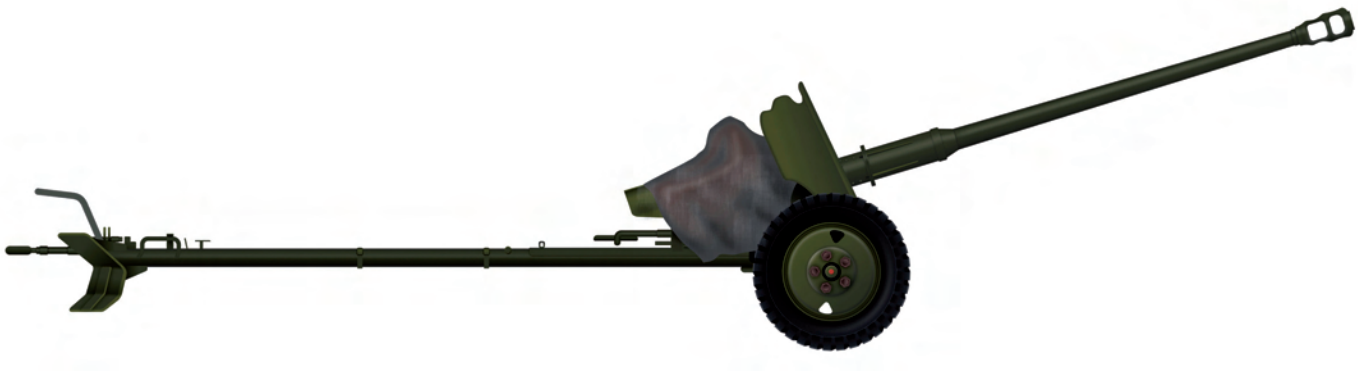
One of the PLA's heroes of the Sino-Soviet confrontations was officer Du Yongchun, 26 years-old at the time. He is illustrated wearing the Type 65 service uniform, consisting of blouse and trousers in olive green, complemented by a belt and the classic cap with a red star. The latter was worn without distinction by both soldiers and officers: what distinguished him as an officer was the map bag attached to his belt and the Type 54 Black Star pistol, a copy of the Soviet-made Tokarev TT-30. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)



To retrieve and thus capture an intact Soviet T-62 main battle tank, the PLA resorted to deploying heavy divers from the PLA Navy and suits borrowed from a nearby waterworks. They wore the TF12 diving suits with the TF12 copper helmet, the latter modelled after the US-made Mk 5 diving helmet. Note the lower portions of sleeves reinforced by rubber, reinforced knee-pads, and heavy boots with steel-caps on the front. Air-supply was provided by a flexible pipe connected to the surface, while lead weights used for diving could either be attached on the breast or the belt. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)



This RPG-gunner of the PLA is shown wearing the winter uniform, with padded gloves and the fur-lined cap (the star on the latter was sometimes made of metal). His firearm is the Model 56 40/80mm anti-tank grenade launcher: a licenced copy of the Soviet-made RPG-2, the first successful anti-tank weapon of its format and type (and a successor to the unsuccessful RPG-1). This weapon used a 40mm cartridge to propel a warhead of 80mm over a maximum range of 150m, and its sole type of warhead – the high-explosive anti-tank – could penetrate up to 180mm of armour. The gunner usually carried a rucksack with three additional rounds. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)



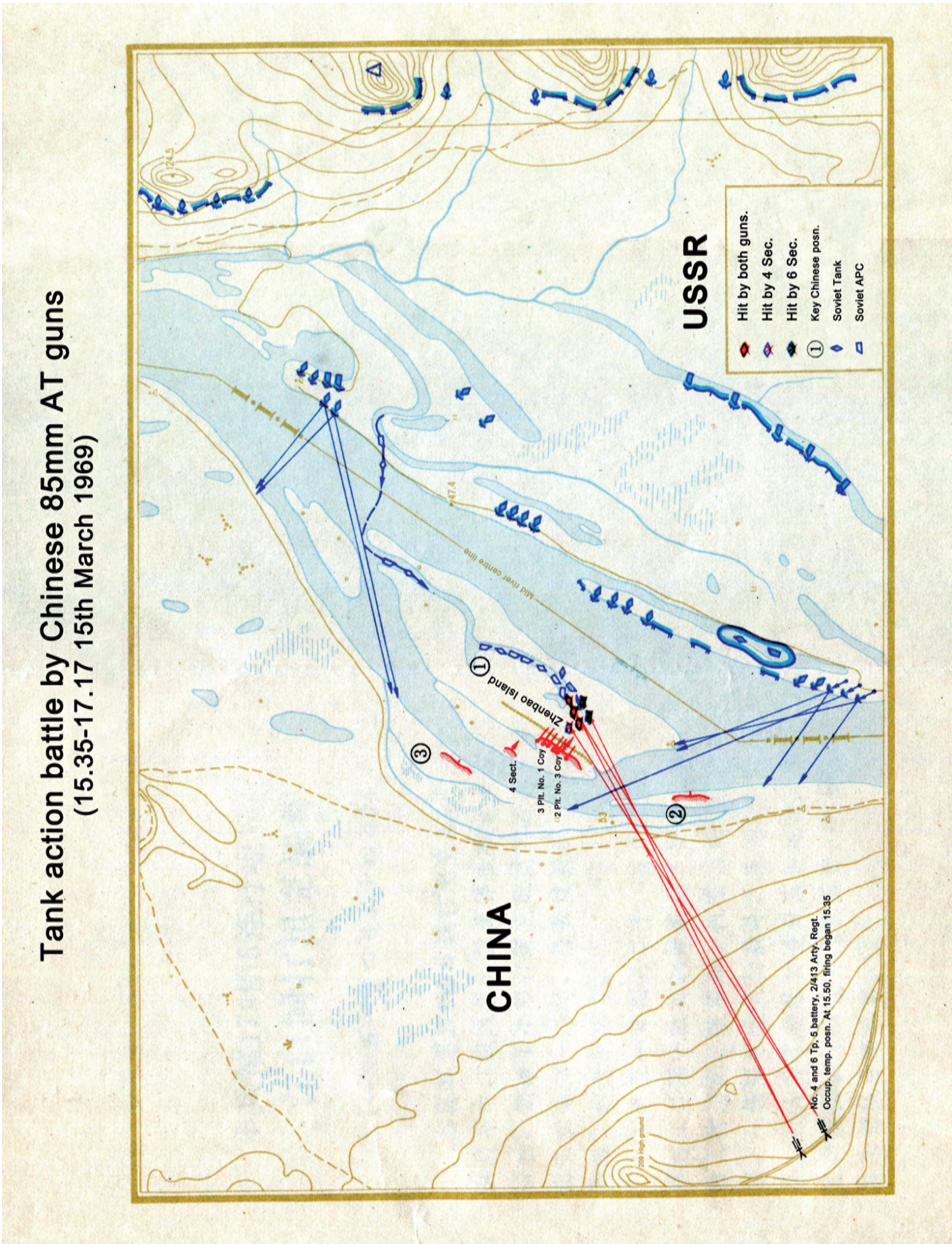
Type 56 field gun was a Chinese copy of the Soviet-designed and manufactured D-44.. The Chinese HEAT round for this weapon had a maximum range of 970 metres and was able of penetrating 100mm armour at an angle of 65 degrees. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)



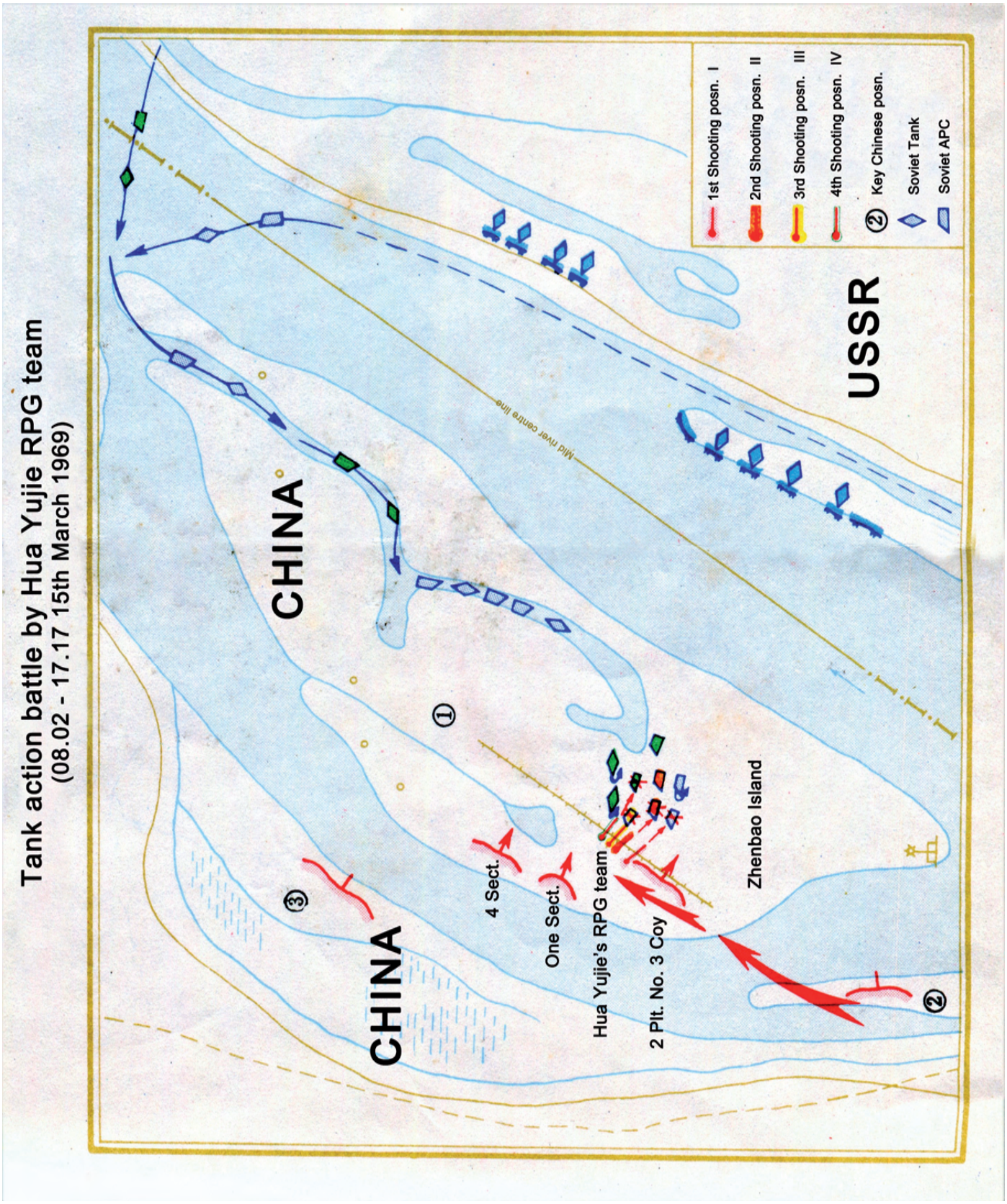
The Type 56 recoilless gun was a copy of the US-made 75mm M20 weapon, and was one of primary anti-tank weapons of the PLA infantry of the 1950s and 1960s. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)



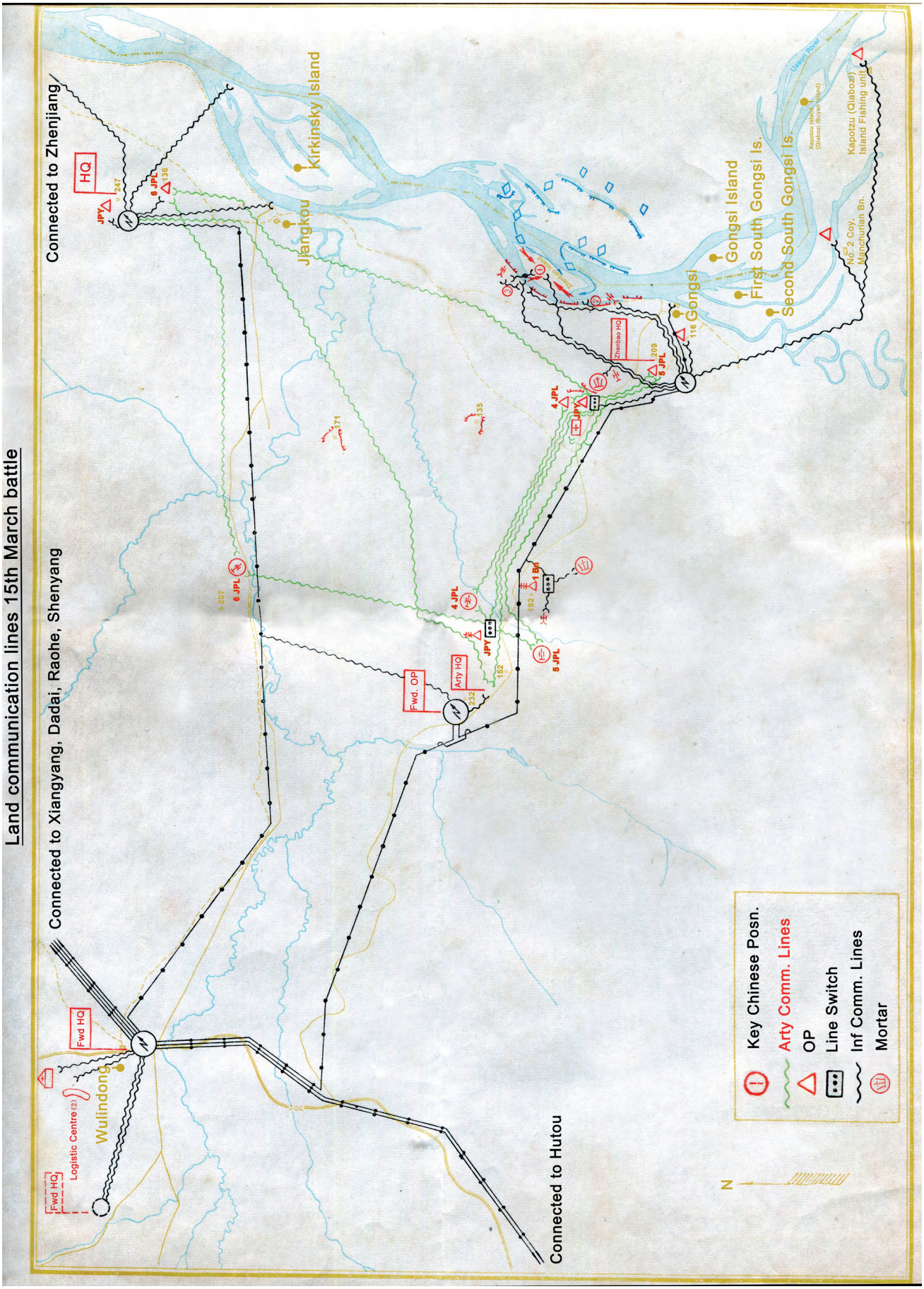
These three photographs show additional weaponry deployed by the PLA during clashes with the Soviets. On the left is the Type 59 anti-tank blast mine, a typical weapon of this kind in that era. For better camouflage in the snowy conditions on the ground in March 1969, Rifleman Zhou Xijin placing the mines in a white pillow case before covering it with a layer or ice or snow. The middle photograph shows a Chinese Type F-3 anti-tank grenade, an improved copy of the Soviet RKG-3. This weapon was stabilised in flight by a drogue parachute to aid striking the target's armour at 90 degrees and maximising penetration. The third photograph shown is a Soveit-made, trip-wire-triggered POMZ-2 anti-infantry mine. (Authors' Collection)



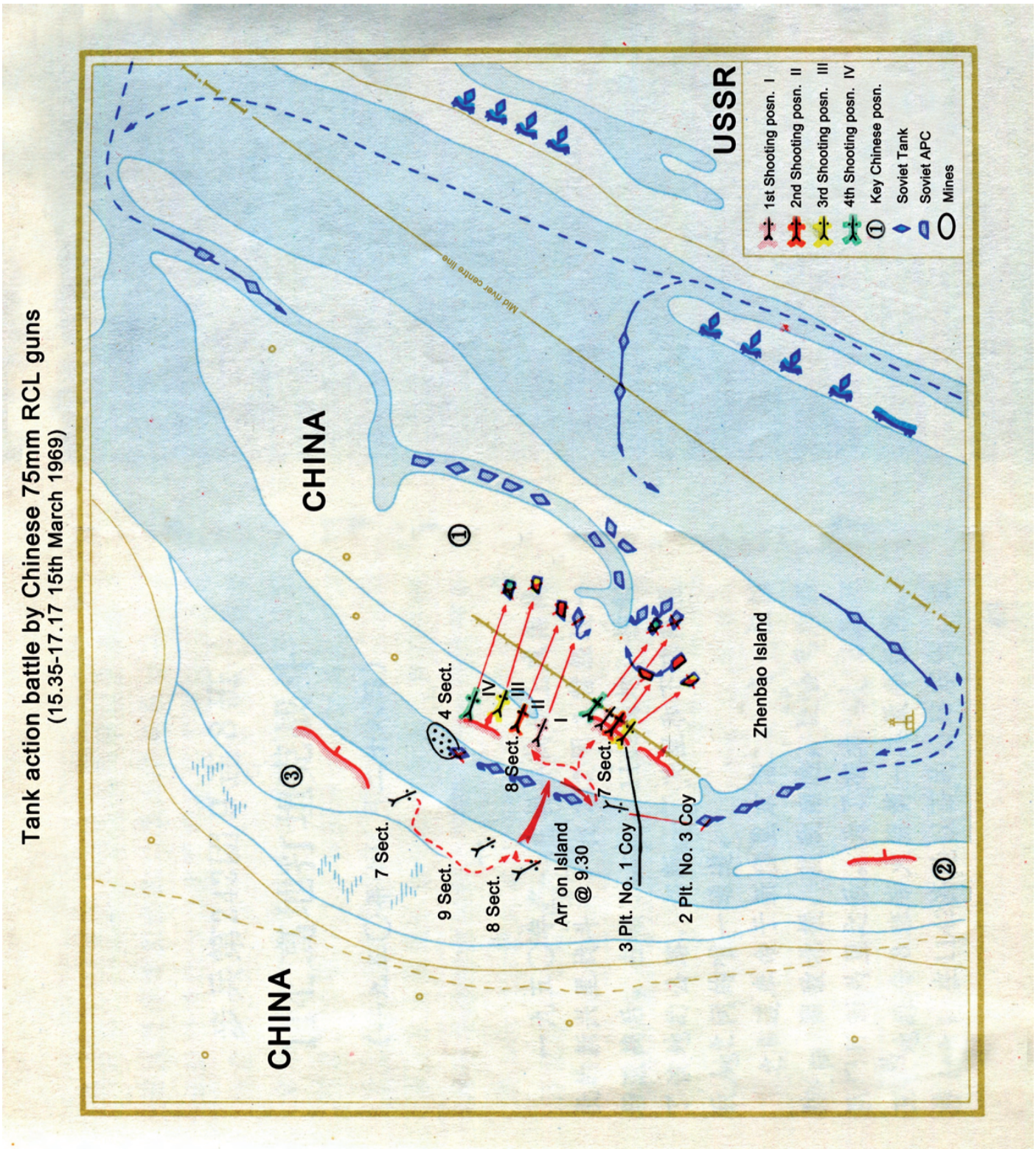
A Chinese military map depicting the action by the 85mm AT guns against the Soviet armour thrust on 15 March 1969. This and the following three maps has been taken from a booklet widely circulated in China in 1970, and has been annotated by the author. (Private collection)



A Chinese military map depicting the action by Hua Yujie's RPG team on Zhenbao Island on 15 March 1969. (Private collection)



This map is an original Chinese military map, annotated in English. The telephone communication lines. The top HQ (northern HQ) is the battle HQ for Kinkinsky Island, a battle that was never fought. The fact that the communication lines for Zhenbao Island and Kinkinsky Island are linked tells us that the Chinese had made detailed plans for an ambush, in a battle to take on the Soviets. Zhenbao Island was not the battleground; the ambush would have been fought on Kinkinsky Island. Either way, there would be a battle. Note the route taken by Tank 545 on 15 March 1969. The tanks were trying to cut the Chinese forces on Zhenbao Island and the mainland by cutting into the frozen inner channel of the Ussuri River. 4 JPL denotes a gun from an artillery battery and the triangle next to "JPY", a battalion artillery OP. P is short for a battalion, while L is shorthand for battery/company. (Private collection)



A military map denoting the action by Chinese 75mm RCL guns against Soviet armour on 15 March 1969. (Private collection)



A map of the eastern part of the Sino-Soviet border as of 1969, showing the locations of border incidents between the USSR and the People's Republic of China. (Map by George Anderson)

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In 2021, Helion & Company published two books by Harold Orenstein and Dmitry Ryabushkin: *The Sino-Soviet Border War of 1969 Volume 1: The Border Conflict that almost Sparked a Nuclear War* and *The Sino-Soviet Border War of 1969 Volume 2: Confrontation at Lake Zhalanashkol August 1969*. These volumes relied largely on the Soviet accounts and presented the Soviet perspective on this confrontation.

When Brothers Fight: Chinese Eyewitness Accounts of the Sino-Soviet Border Battles 1969 aims to fill the gap with accounts from Chinese veterans who took part in these border wars. The authors have selected two of the best-known incidents of the period, the Battle of Zhenbao (Damansky) Island (March–May 1969) and the Tielieketi (Lake Zhalanashkol) Incident (13 August 1969), as the focus for this book.

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When Brothers Fight: Chinese Eyewitness Accounts of the Sino-Soviet Border Battles 1969 is richly illustrated with photographs and artworks from the period of the Sino-Soviet confrontation as well as specially commissioned artworks.



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